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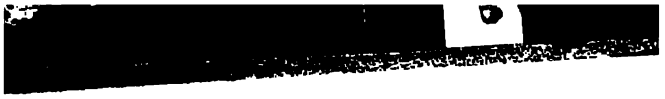

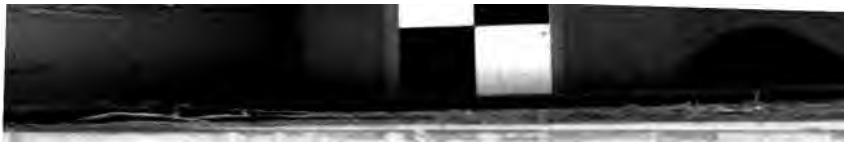

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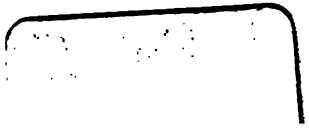

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Voices in the Night

By

Flora Annie Steel

Author of
'On the Face of the Waters,' etc.

London
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1900

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PROLOGUE

THE new year was already some hours old, but the world to which it had come was still dark. Dark with a curious obscurity, that was absolutely opaque yet faintly luminous, because of the white fog which lay on all things and hid them from the stars; for the sky above was clear, cold, almost frosty.

That was why the fog, born, not of cool vapour seeking for cloud life among the winds of heaven, but of hot smoke loving the warmth of dust and ashes, clung so closely to the earth; to its birthplace.

It was an acrid, bitter smoke, not even due to the dead hearthfires of a dead day, since they—like all else pertaining to the domestic life of India—give small outward sign of existence, but to the smouldering piles of litter and refuse which are lit every evening upon the outskirts of human habitation. Dull heaps with a minimum of fire, a maximum of smoke, where the humanity which has produced the litter, the refuse, gathers for gossip or for warmth.

Even in the fields beyond the multitude of men, where some long-limbed peasant, watching his hope of harvest, dozes by a solitary fire, this same smoke rises in a solid column, until—beaten down by the colder moister air above—it drifts sideways to spread like a vast cobweb over the dew-set carpet of green corn.

So it was small wonder if here, at Nushapore, with its fifty thousand and odd dwellers in cantonments, its two hundred and odd thousand dwellers in the town, the smoke fog hid earth from heaven; hid even the steady coming of day.

For it was close on dawn. The most silent, most restful hour of an Indian night, yet one still holding that vague sense of life and movement inseparable from an environment in which there is no set time for sleeping or waking; in which

folk gossip all night, and sleep all day, should the humour so take them.

It had so seized on some one, apparently, this New Year's night, for two voices rose, not in whispers, but monotone, from one of the verandahs in Government House—rose insistently, until, from within the closed doors, came a sharp though drowsy order for silence—

'*Chupra'o!*'

The voices ceased; such orders, even when drowsy, must be obeyed, since they come from the master: at any rate, till he sleeps again.

So the minutes slipped by. Upon the round rim of the level wheatfields beyond the smoke, the violet sky above the cobwebs faded to grey at the sun's approach. The fog round Nushapore grew whiter, more luminous.

Then the voices began again; monotonous, insistent. Were they, in old-world fashion, beguiling the reality of darkness with legends of some heroic age of light? Were they, more modernly, making that reality darker by taking thought for the morrow, and discussing, say, the depreciation of the rupee? Or were they dreamers still, though wakeful, and were they discoursing of equality and the rights of the individual? Such theories are to be heard nowadays even in this Indian smoke fog.

'*Chupra'o*, you brutes, or——'

The threatening voice paused as a dull reverberation shivered through the chill air. It was the first gun of the Imperial salute which every New Year's morning proclaims that Victoria, *Kaiser-i-hind*, reigns over the fog, and the voices in it.

Now, when a hundred and one guns, each with its message of mastery, stand between a man and his sleep, what use is there in commanding silence elsewhere?

So the threat ceased, and between the beats of the guns the voices had their say unchecked.

About what?

That is a difficult question to answer, when the voices are in the night.

CHAPTER I

THE TOTALISATOR

'WHAT'S the big blackboard with white sums?' asked little Jerry Arbuthnot.

Jack Raymond, who was holding the child's hand, looked down at the six-year-old figure in the natty riding-suit so like his own, save for the racing silk which he himself wore half-hidden by a covert coat.

'It is the map of India,' he began, then pulled up at the sight of Jerry's face. 'You shouldn't believe everything you're told, young man—it hampers the sense of humour! No, Jerry, that's the totalisator—a calculating machine for doing sums in the compound rules. Ask Miss Drummond if it isn't?'

The girl thus challenged let the cool disdain, which is nowadays so often the prevailing expression of young womanhood for manhood, become slightly more aggressive.

'It is a betting machine, Gerald——'

'Don't profane the word, Miss Drummond,' interrupted the man. 'Betting is a bracing mental exercise. You back your opinion to be right against fixed odds. But this five-rupee-in-the-slot-trust-in-Providence business is a demoralising compromise. You stand neither to win nor lose.'

'Then, please, what does come to the five wupees?' asked Jerry urgently.

'Practical boy!' commented Jack Raymond with a laugh. 'It is "as you was" generally; for you see, Jerry, the world backs the favourite as a rule. It likes to follow a lead! And, if you divide the total of the tickets by their number, it's poor fun! So take my advice, young man; when you totalise, go for a rank outsider and stand to collar the lot!'

Lesley Drummond, being the child's governess, frowned. 'I see your mother arriving, Gerald,' she said, 'and we were to join her at once. Come!

But Jerry held his new-found friend fast by the hand. 'You come too,' he petitioned, 'my mother is just an orful nice person.'

There was a moment's pause, during which the child's grip on the man tightened, before the latter replied, 'I know that, Jerry; your mother and I are old friends; but I have only time to see you safe across the green. I'm up in this race.'

'I used to wide waces when I was in India once,' began the child, when Lesley cut him short.

'You never rode a race in your life, Gerald, and I can't allow you to say that you have.' Then she turned suddenly, in the purely impersonal confidence of grievance, to the stranger beside her (for they had only just been introduced to each other), and said, 'I can't think why, but ever since Gerald landed in Bombay, just a week ago, he has had a bad habit of claiming to have done all sorts of things he never *could* have done. Lady Arbuthnot thinks it is because the child really does remember India a little. You see he was past four when he went home. But that,' she added magisterially, with a frown for the culprit, 'does not excuse telling stories—does it?'

The man's blue eyes, so curiously overshadowed by thick bushy fair eyebrows, sought the child's cool grey ones, and a sudden reflection of the perplexed obstinacy he saw in them came to his own.

'How the deuce do you know he hasn't?' he muttered, half to himself. 'This isn't England, where you can bet your last *dib* on certainties.' Then he looked at the immaculate white collar and cuffs of the figure in a tailor-made coat and skirt beside him, and gave in to convention by adding resignedly, 'But you mustn't tell whackers, you know, Jerry—must you?'

'I don't!' protested the six-year-old. 'I weally thought I had. But I will, anyhow, when I'm big. An' I'll bet wif the bookies evewy time, Mr. Waymond, like you do.'

That glance at the collar and cuffs showed guilt in it this time. 'Not a bit of it,' said the conscious sinner stoutly. 'You'll be a mighty big swell like your father, Sir George——'

'Please, they call my daddy "His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor" now,' interrupted Jerry, 'and his salute is

twenty-one whole guns. They made an orful booming at the wailway station. But I liked it. An' the twoops pwesented arms to him to-day at the Queen's pawade—didn't they, Miss Dwummond?'

'Of course, dear! As Lieutenant-Governor, your father is entitled to these honours,' replied Lesley, head in air.

'Of course!' echoed the man beside her, making her, in her turn, glance at him, and wonder if contempt or envy brought that odd note to his voice. Either way, she admitted reluctantly, he would have carried such honours bravely; but then so would have half the Englishmen she had seen since landing at Bombay. The environment of India had a trick of giving an air of distinction to the Anglo-Saxon.

Radical as she was, inevitably, seeing that she had led the life of a definitely independent woman in England for six years, she felt a sneaking satisfaction as she walked across the enclosure with the tall spare man, whose haggard face looked still more haggard above his gay racing colours.

The afternoon sun sent blue-black shadows behind them. The golden glory in front of them lay lavishly on the shifting kaleidoscope of many-hued dresses. To one side, the pipers of a Highland regiment strutted their floating tartans through a pibroch. To the other, rose white mess-tents decorated with flowers and bunting, each centring its knot of crowding, colourful guests.

But the densest, most colourful crowd gathered round the totalisator which stood between the first and second-class enclosures, so that the sergeants in uniform could attend at the same time to both its five-rupee board fronting the grand stand and its one-rupee board giving on the mixed multitude; could attend even to the slender dark hands which sometimes stretched over the barrier with five rupees in their palms, and a petition to be allowed the higher stake. Hands unable to grasp the fact that five lesser gains may equal one greater gain; an inability provocative of much needless discontent all over the world.

Lesley Drummond's eyes, as she walked across the lawn, grew dazzled at the unusual glitter and colour of the crowd, her ears grew confused by the gamut of civilisation struck by the varying costumes. There, was the first note of Western influence in a pair of patent-leather shoes; yonder,

the last echo of the East in a white turban above a frock coat.

'It's a queer crowd,' said Jack Raymond suddenly, as if in explanation of her look. 'And I could tell you a lot of queer tales. That man, for instance'—he nodded after a burly figure in a tinsel biretta which had just thrust a flabby waxen hand at him with a liquid Persian compliment on the New Year—'is the biggest brute in India. A Delhi pensioner by rights, but he does Buckingham here to the Rightful Heir, that young sweep to the left, in cloth of gold.'

'Rightful Heir!' echoed Lesley captiously, 'rightful heir to what?' Anglo-Indians in her limited experience oscillated between supposing her crassly ignorant or absolutely omniscient; and either treatment annoyed her, for she was accustomed to consider herself, and be considered, thoroughly well informed.

'The whole caboodle,' replied Jack Raymond tolerantly. 'You see there were kings in Nushapore——'

'I know *that*, of course!' she interrupted impatiently, 'but do they still claim——?'

'Great Moses! Claim? Nushapore is a *vox clamavi*, chiefly to mutiny pensions which, being mortgaged up to the hilt, are of no use to any one but the usurers. But *they* will generally lend the bankrupts enough for the entrance-fee to the races, so of course they come here in crowds.'

'Why?' asked the girl, feeling herself a mere mark of interrogation.

'It's a change from betting on cocks and kites. Besides, there's the position.'

'What position?' she asked, with a prayer for patience.

He laughed easily. 'All races are equal on a course, Miss Drummond; and a racecourse is, practically, the only place where the native meets us on equal terms. Look! there's the biggest brute in Asia elbowing Mrs. Member-of-the-Board Collins at the totalisator! If he tried it on elsewhere, some one would kick him, and quite right too.'

Lesley's disdain became active, though she told herself the remark was only to be expected from 'that type of man.'

'May I ask why?' she said superbly.

'Because it is contrary to his own estimate of the proprieties, and it is impossible to be virtuous on another person's decalogue, isn't it?' he replied coolly; then, ere she had time

to reply, went on: 'There are a lot of chaps want kicking in this crowd, I can tell you. For instance, do you see that man buttonholing the Rightful Heir?'

'With the red tie?' she asked, feeling interested in spite of herself. 'Is he English?'

'God forbid!' said her companion piously. 'Grecian Archipelago, I should say for choice; but he won't let on. Anyhow, he's a merchant; wheat, diamonds, dust, bones—everything out of which he can screw a *pice*. And Jehân Aziz, the Rightful Heir, has the finest table emerald in the world—the old king's signet-ring. Now I don't mind betting it will be in Paris before the year 's out.'

'In Paris!—why in Paris? I don't understand—nobody could be expected—nobody could understand,' protested Lesley.

Jack Raymond smiled. 'Filthy Lucre—his real name is Philip Lucanaster—does, I assure you, Miss Drummond! He knows that heirlooms always pay debts of honour.' He paused to lift his cap elaborately to a well-dressed fair woman who passed with a tall dark man, whose face had a wistful look. 'There's a case in point,' he went on carelessly. 'That fellow—he is a pure-bred Brahmin, Miss Drummond—is paying his heirlooms through the nose because he contracted a debt of honour in marrying an Englishwoman. She has made him sacrifice home, friends, relations; prints his cards Mr. and Mrs. Chris Davenant—his real name is Krishn Davenund—and so tries to hang on to the frayed edge of society'—he glanced at an effusive greeting between the lady in question and Mr. Lucanaster.

'Poor thing!' ejaculated Lesley with the wholesale defence of all things feminine which belongs to her type. 'What a terrible experience for her——'

'And for him,' retorted her companion drily. 'Matrimonial mistakes, though women will not recognise the fact, come inevitably in pairs.'

Apparently there was some suggestion in his own words, for he looked ahead hastily, and finding himself closer to an advancing group than he wished to be, told Jerry he must be off, and turned back towards the paddock.

'Who was that, Lesley?' asked Lady Arbuthnot, who, with her husband, formed the centre of that little knot of advancing notables. She was a beautiful woman, beautifully

dressed, and with the beautiful manners which a perfectly calm consciousness of beauty always gives to a woman. Her soft voice softened still more as she spoke to her child's governess; so there was small wonder that the latter's face, as she replied, told yet one more tale of modern girlhood—the tale of one woman's blind hero-worship of another.

'A race steward. Jerry took a violent fancy to him and I didn't! But he said he knew you—a Mr. Raymond——'

A faint echo of the name was checked on Grace Arbuthnot's lips by a greeting to a new arrival, which, when she returned to the subject, lent them the continuance of a set smile of welcome.

'Yes! I knew him very well years ago. I shall be glad to meet him again.' The faint unreality which previous rehearsal gives, even to truth, was in her voice.

'He's up in this wace,' quoted Jerry sagely, 'or he'd have come, for he said you was orful nice. Oh, mum! do be quick, or we shan't see him win.'

'Win? How do you know he's going to win, sonnie?' asked Grace Arbuthnot, and there was no unreality in her voice now, only a slightly troubled curiosity.

''Cos he will,' answered the child in childish fashion; whereat his mother flushed faintly, but smiled also.

Jerry was a good prophet. Five minutes after, he was dancing on his chair, as crimson and gold came in first. 'Oh! did you see, mum?' he cried. 'He was quite quite first.'

Lady Arbuthnot held out her hand to steady the child, and her voice seemed to need support also. 'Of course I saw, dear; and I am glad.'

'So's every one, Lady Arbuthnot,' said young Nevill Lloyd—captain by virtue of his A.D.C.-ship—who stood behind her. 'Raymond is our most popular win.'

It seemed so by the cheer which rose as the winners went by.

'I suppose he has won a lot of money,' sniffed Lesley, noting the rider's pleased face.

'Not a penny, Miss Drummond!' protested the young fellow. 'Raymond is only *on* the saddle when he rides another chap's horse, as he's doing to-day; and it *is* safer, you know.'

'I do *not* know, Captain Lloyd,' she retorted loftily. 'I know nothing about horse-racing. *Why* is it safer?'

He coughed uneasily. 'Ah! I thought you would know, you know, and it's a bit hard to explain. You see, Indian racing is sometimes a trifle odd—considering, I mean, that we are all gentlemen—or supposed to be so. But Raymond,' here he brightened up, 'is always a straight win. That's why Lucre and his crew——'

He stopped short as one of a group of men, amongst whom Mr. Lucanaster showed conspicuous by his red tie, paused in the general exodus to answer a bystander's question.

'Luck? How the deuce is any one to have luck when you can't get a fair bet placed? Even the Devil's Own didn't get on with His Royal Highness.'

Mr. Lucanaster acknowledged another of his nicknames by a lavish smile. 'There is faith as mustard in Raymond among our nigger friends,' he said, with the eccentricity of accent and idiom which, following him into every language he knew, made his nationality an insoluble problem. He glanced back as he spoke towards a cluster of native gentlemen who, following a lead as ever, were also making their way from the stand. The similarity of their oval yellow faces, their thin curves of moustache trained to a fine sweep above the full betel-stained lips, proclaimed them of the same family; but Lesley singled out the Rightful Heir by his cloth-of-gold coatee, and by something which, rather to her own surprise, thrilled her unexpectedly—a green gleam of sovereignty on the small supple hand raised in a *saluam* of servitude as its owner passed the Lieutenant-Governor and his party.

'I'm always glad,' continued Nevill Lloyd virtuously, 'when Lucre and his crew are hit! They get betting with the Nawâbs and offering 'em drinks. Shocking bad form—by the way, Miss Drummond, come to our tent and have a peach-brandy!'

Lesley, with another trait of the modern girl—her toleration of the male sex up to the age of twenty-five—laughed good-humouredly. 'It isn't bad form with a lady, apparently, for that's the fifth peach-brandy I've been offered in half an hour!'

'Well! aren't there five tents? And you haven't been to ours,' argued the lad quite gravely. 'Do come! It needn't

be a peach-brandy, you know. Have tea, or a chocolate caramel, just to show there isn't any ill-feeling.'

She smiled in sisterly fashion at his kindly, clean-looking young face, and—Jerry having gone with his father—passed with it into that marvellous golden glory of Indian sunshine which still struck her Western eyes as the most noticeable factor in her Eastern environment. The rest, barring the native costumes, was hopelessly Western, she told herself, as she stood listening to the scraps of talk around, while Nevill Lloyd struggled for her cup of tea. Polo talk, polite talk, political talk; then something she could not classify as two natives drifted by with an air of aloofness.

As they did so a plaintive woman's voice rose close to her. 'I shall send baby home, as we've been transferred to Cawnpore.'

'Isn't she rather young?' said some one in answer.

'Oh! it isn't *that*,' replied the first voice, 'I mean that I couldn't take a child to Cawnpore. I should always be thinking of the well!'

Always thinking of the well!

The words brought home to Lesley Drummond in an instant — a never-to-be-forgotten instant — that *something* which so often chills the golden glory of the Eastern sunshine, that vision of the sentinel of memory which, for both races, bars the door of reconciliation that might otherwise stand open for comradeship.

She had read books on that past tragedy, she had told herself that it *was* past, that it should be forgotten; and now—

'Drink your tea sharp!' said Nevill Lloyd with kindly familiarity, 'or you'll be getting ague. That's the worst of this beastly hole. It's always in extremes. Hot as blazes one moment, chill as charity——' He paused, for the iron hand beneath the parti-coloured velvet and brocade glove of India was resolved to have the girl in its grip at once, and a rattling thud, followed by a dull reverberation, rose from the near distance, making more than one in the chattering crowd pause also, until the sound came again, when the pause ended cheerfully in fresh chatter.

'It's a funeral,' explained Nevill Lloyd in answer to Lesley's look. 'The cemetery is close to the course, and enteric is shocking bad in barracks just now. Young

Summers of ours is down with it, too. Awful ill, poor chap —couldn't be worse, I'm afraid.'

A lady, passing, turned to listen, and, as she went on, said to her companion in a whisper, 'I do hope they won't have to put off the ball to-night—I've got such a jolly new dress from Paris for it.'

Another vision came to Lesley, the vision of a dead lad and a Paris dress.

'Come for a turn — you're positively shivering,' said Captain Lloyd concernedly.

They had barely escaped from the crush, however, when Sir George Arbuthnot appeared in the important fuss of new authority. A cipher telegram had come from England, he must return to Government House at once, if Captain Lloyd would kindly order the carriage.

'It's an orful nuisance, Miss Dwummond,' commented Jerry, tucking his hand into hers after his fashion with every one he liked, 'for dad and I was going to put five whole wupees on the blackboard thing for the Cup wace. And now he can't, of course. But I can. Can't I, dad?' he added, artfully appealing to a weak point in his parent, 'for you pwomised, didn't you?'

Now the keeping of promises had always been a prop to Sir George's somewhat irresolute mind, so he promptly gave Jerry the five rupees, and, with a suggestion that Miss Drummond would help him to get the ticket, bustled off, leaving the latter no time for remonstrance.

She stood looking resentfully at the pieces of silver which were to betray her principles, then said with chill dignity—

'We had better take the ticket at once, I suppose, if it has got to be taken. Come, Gerald!'

But Jerry's face was the face of Jerry when he forgot his hymn, and his hands, holding the five rupees, went behind his back to match his consciousness of error.

'I'm afwaid I don't know, please,' he began.

'Don't know what? Speak up, don't be stupid!'

The flaming flag which always heralded the child's confessions of ignorance flew to his face; but, after his habit, he looked his inquisitor full in the eyes.

'What, please, a wankest outsider is.'

Lesley hid her smile deftly; she had ample practice in the

art with her pupil. 'And *I* don't know which *is* the rankest outsider, so we must take it on chance,' she replied tartly.

The little laddie's face fell, but he stood firm. 'Please, I'd *wather* take it on the—the other; for Mr. Waymond knows lots about betting and you don't know nothing.'

'I'm glad I don't!' she retorted, feeling quite nettled, for Jerry's obstinate adherence to his ideal was not to be set aside with a high hand. 'And what is more, I don't wish to; so if you're not satisfied, we needn't take the ticket at all!' So far she got almost spitefully, then something smote the womanhood and motherhood in her. 'Or,' she went on, 'suppose we take one on Kingscraft—every one says he is sure to win.'

The boy's face was a study of pitying contempt. 'Kingscwaft!' he echoed. 'Why, he's the favourite, and I'm not going to foller a lead—*I*'m going to collar the lot!'

A sudden mist came to the girl's eyes; and through it she seemed to see the sturdy little soul enshrined in the sturdy little body. She held out her hand and said simply, 'Come, there's Mr. Raymond—he'll know.'

'The rankest outsider?' echoed Jack Raymond quite gravely. 'Let's have a look at the card, Jerry.' Then, as he stooped over the child, he added, 'Shall I read out the names, or can you?'

The confessional scarlet flew to the little lad's very ears this time. 'Only some, I'm 'fwaid. That one's Kitten. An' I know that other one—least one end of it I do, 'cos it's Miss Dwummond's name.'

'Which? Bonnie Lesley?' asked Jack Raymond, and the scarlet flag flew to another face.

'Only the other end of it, please,' corrected Jerry; whereat one flush vanished in two laughs.

'My name doesn't matter, dear; read the next,' began Lesley, when Jack Raymond interrupted her.

'Excuse me, we gamblers believe in omens.—H'm! country-bred mare—undersized—maiden—Of course I remember! a post entry, railed down this morning—owner up—that looks good—white and green sleeves—better—the fellow knows his border ballads. Bonnie Lesley it is, my boy, for the luck'—'of the name' trembled on his tongue, but the immaculate collar and cuffs made him alter the phrase to 'the thing.'

The next instant he and Jerry were elbowing their way to the totalisator, Lesley waiting for them out of the crush, and watching fresh white strokes come as fast as they could to number two on the blackboard. That, she thought, must be the favourite's number, while poor Bonnie Lesley, the rankest outsider, was probably thirteen, with but one white stroke!

She turned to the bookmakers' booths to see if she could verify her guess by their lists, but all save one, round which a few determined old stagers were lounging, had already closed. However, she saw what she wanted there—Kingscraft, No. 2, Bonnie Lesley, No. 13!

When she turned back again, the little and the big covert coats had disappeared in the crowd; indeed, she was beginning to wonder what had kept them so long, when Jack Raymond's voice called her from behind.

'This way, Miss Drummond, everything's full up this side, but I'll take you across to the other.'

Jerry, leaning over the railings below the judge's stand, beamed with delight, but Lesley, finding Mr. Lucanaster and the Rightful Heir next her, felt herself mixed up with the extreme racing set and their nefarious practices. So she glared at her guide resentfully, though he was too much absorbed in his race-glass to notice it.

'Just in time,' he said, looking round with a cheerful smile. 'Now, Jerry, my man! steady to win, or lose—that's the game!'

He followed his own advice, anyhow, and Lesley, watching his hands, felt instinctively that the man must be a first-class rifle shot. But Jerry followed the advice also, though, with a wonder as to whether the strain was good or bad for the child, she noticed his fingers clenched white on the white railings in his effort to be calm.

'They're off!'

The familiar stir of relief ran through the crowd.

Then came the familiar silence, while every eye was riveted on the confused onward sweep over the curved tan—that silent half-seen sweep, which, for all its dimness, its silence to the outward ear and eye, holds in it from the first, a sob, a strain of fiercest effort for the inward sight and hearing.

So, at the curve, the trail of horses clustered, spread out again, settled for the straight run home!

'Bonnie Lesley's had it in her pocket from start to finish, Jerry,' said Jack Raymond, suddenly lowering his glasses. 'By Jove! I wish I'd——' He broke off and raised the glasses again.

But by this time others had seen that the little brown mare was coming home to her stables cheerfully, and a blank half-irritated surprise began to leaven the suspense.

Then a voice—Mr. Lucanaster's—said, 'What a rotten race!'

It was, to many; yet as the little mare neared the spectators, there was something in the bronze gleam of her straining muscle, something in the deer-like bound of her forward sweep, something in the eager head with its full anxious eye, outstretched as if to pass the post a second sooner, something in the slack swing of a pair of green sleeves telling of a win, hands down, which made every sportsman present forget personal disappointment in a surge of admiration for the game little beast.

'By Jove! Raymond!' said one of the judges as he passed out, 'what a flyer! I'd give something to own her!'

'I'd give something to have known her,' corrected another. 'Twenty to one! Ye Gods! What a chance for my widow and orphans!'—

'Who gave *you* the tip, Jack?' asked an envious voice.

'What tip?' replied Jack Raymond imperturbably.

'Oh! don't fizzle—I saw you—just at the last—you must have about broken the——'

'Totalisators don't break, my dear fellow,' interrupted Jack. 'Now, Jerry, if Miss Drummond is ready, we can go and claim your winnings.'

She made no answer till the comparative solitude of re-crossing the course was reached, then she turned to him and said, in a voice to match his own—

'And your winnings also.'

Their eyes met, and he took his cue once more from what he saw. 'I'll get *them* after. It is a good lot, for I backed the little mare properly because she had your name. Only depreciated rupees though! Jerry! can you do sums yet? What is five thousand rupees at one shilling and threepence farthing? That, I think, is to-day's quotation, is it not, Miss Drummond?'

His reflected defiance made the original stronger.

'Tell Mr. Raymond, Jerry, that you haven't yet begun his system of compound multiplication, and, as I hope you never will, he had better drop the subject.'

She had not looked at the straight line of those bushy fair eyebrows, or she might have realised the futility of high-handedness; but she did realise it, with a certain respect, from the first words he spoke.

'You have no right to object,' he said coolly. 'The coincidence of name was not your doing—nor mine! Nor are you responsible for the mare's win. Therefore, since neither Jerry nor I consider ourselves in your debt for our ill-gotten gains, we leave you out of the question, and for the life of me I can't see why you should insist on being in it when you dislike it.'

His sledge-hammer common-sense left her gasping, and ere she found words he had reverted to negligent banter. 'But, of course, if you feel guilty, I'll put the rupees into the poor-box—that is always the refuge of the conscience-stricken! I can afford it easily, for I've had a regular run of luck to-day. So let it be peace and charity with this man! Now, Jerry! for the rupees, and after your pockets are stuffed, I'll take you to your mother and explain.'

Lesley, feeling limp, admitted to herself that the suggestion was thoughtful. She also yielded the point of manners as she watched him standing before Lady Arbuthnot with Jerry's hand, as ever, tucked confidingly into a bigger one; and yet Grace Arbuthnot was one of those women who, as a rule, make men look rough.

'I'm sorry to begin by bringing you a bad boy,' he said, evading her set welcome rather abruptly, 'but Miss Drummond will tell you how demoralising I am, so you must forgive the young sinner for the sake of the old one.'

The words held no intent, and yet as Grace Arbuthnot stood listening and looking at those two—the man and the child hand-in-hand—the faint shrinking which tells of a sudden enlightenment, bodily or spiritual, came to her eyes. 'You can hardly be held responsible, Mr. Raymond,' she said slowly when the tale was done. 'It is Sir George's fault, and I will tell him——' Then, as if to escape from the situation, she turned to Lesley, 'By the way, have you seen him lately? Gone home, did you say! Why?'

The reply seemed to take her from the present and the

past also, so that her manner had all the elaborate graciousness she accorded to mere acquaintances as she said, 'Then I will follow his example and say good-bye, Mr. Raymond. These English telegrams are so interesting, aren't they? Especially now the general election is on; for it means so much to India, doesn't it?'

'Possibly,' he replied coolly, 'but it means very little to me, Lady Arbuthnot. I am no politician nowadays.'

Lesley Drummond, as, driving away, she watched the haggard face pass under the big blackboard with its white sums which rose from the motley crowd to show clear against the dusty levels of India, wondered once more if his tone meant contempt or envy.

Grace Arbuthnot, however, did not notice the tone at all. She was absorbed in something else, and, as soon as they reached Government House, went straight to her husband's writing-room.

After ten minutes she was still standing where she had paused beside him, and was drawing her dainty pale gloves through her hands impatiently as she stared at the telegram Sir George had shown her. For he trusted her absolutely in such matters; and in so doing showed his sense. She came, to begin with, of an Anglo-Indian family which had written its name large on the annals of Empire. An only daughter, she had kept house for her father, the Lieutenant-Governor of his time, and so from her earliest girlhood had listened to the talk of the ablest men in India, and become familiar with the problems of its government. Then, of herself, he knew her to be as capable of giving a sound opinion as he was; knew that no one from the Himalaya to Cape Comorin took a keener interest than she did in the welfare of the people.

'Yes! I, too, thought they might perhaps withdraw it, but still it is mean, inexpressibly mean!' she said at last.

Her voice was loud and firm, and Sir George glanced uneasily at the door of his secretary's room; for the fear of a certain proverb about grey mares lingered with him. It dies hard in Indian bureaucracy.

'Horribly mean,' she went on, 'for it does not lessen your responsibility; or alter the position, so far as you're concerned.'

Sir George took up his pen a trifle irritably—a sign that he was beginning to weary of the discussion. 'Pardon me, I

think it does. So long as these secret instructions were in my confidential box I was bound, in any crisis, to follow them; but now they are destroyed'—he paused at her look, pointed to a pile of grey ashes in the fireplace, and went on heartily—'upon my soul, it's a relief! The contents can't leak out now; and I've been awfully nervous about that ever since Ewebank took to asking questions about a secret plan of campaign in the House. Some one got a hint of it somehow; and, as you know, that pestilent paper here, the *Voice of India*, has been on the bad-faith tack. And I can't imagine anything more disastrous, just at present when the city is seething about the plague and the withdrawal of municipal powers, than that this policy—which, frankly, subverts all our professions—should be got at. Even at home it would be ruination during the elections; a regular party cry.'

'And yet,' said Lady Arbuthnot with a fine scorn, 'every sane man knows we can't proclaim everything from the housetops in India; knows we *must* have secret orders. And, paper or no paper, we have them still! If there is a row, Government will expect you——'

A sudden obstinacy came to her husband's face. 'I should telegraph home for orders.'

Her hands closed tighter; she frowned. 'No, you wouldn't, George; everything might depend on accepting the responsibility of immediate action—you——'

He drew his chair close to the table and dipped his pen in the ink—sign that he meant to hear no more.

'I should do what I thought best, of course; but I should also be more cautious to avoid doing'—he changed his phrase, 'to avoid receiving a slap in the face. Anyhow, I'm not exactly sorry the instructions *have* been withdrawn. Even delay in action seems to me to involve less risk—of permanent injury, I mean—than the upset there would infallibly be if our intention leaked out before the event.'

She paused at the door with a look of tolerant affection. 'But why should it have leaked out? Besides, it did strengthen your hands enormously—that is why I got father to speak to the Council—that is why I was so glad when he succeeded. And he was glad too—he knows the advantage of having it in black and white.'

She said the last words, half to herself, as she went slowly

up the wide shallow stairs, so un-English, so still more un-Indian, which led to the upper story of Government House.

She was thinking, as she spoke, of her father's letter, in which he had told her of his success, and given her an outline of what the demi-official notification to follow would be. That letter was still in her jewel-box upstairs, where she had placed it as a sort of hostage against the more definite letter to come. And suddenly the temptation not to destroy that *précis* of policy came to her. Supposing she kept it just to show George—whose disinclination to accept responsibility she recognised as a source of danger—that, if the worst came to the worst, he could still prove a private knowledge in black and white of what had been the Government policy. The letter was very definite, very explicit.

The thought came to her as she passed into her room, and as she did so, she saw the reflection of her English maid's face in the looking-glass, as she stood rummaging hastily in the dressing-table drawers.

'What is it, Needham?'

The maid turned, with a cry of mingled relief and alarm, 'Oh, milady! I'm so glad you're back. I can't find the little jewel-box nowhere—it 'adn't so much in it, milady, for I 'd took out the diamonds last night—that was when I seen it last. It 'ad your string of pearls, and *ayah* says she's not seen it either, but there was people in the verandah last night, for Captain Lloyd he threw boots at 'em, for disturbin' him. Oh, dear! oh, dear! why did I ever come to Ingiar!' Here Needham dissolved into tears.

Grace Arbuthnot turned very pale. 'The little jewel-box,' she echoed. Then she pulled herself together, and said calmly, 'Well, it is lucky it was only the pearls. Go down and ask Sir George to come to me at once; for if the box has really been stolen, the sooner the police know the better.'

Half an hour afterwards she was answering the police officer's questions still more calmly.

'Only a string of pearls—large ones—they belonged to my mother, who got them, I believe, from one of the late Nawâb's wives, and a few small trinkets—there is a list of them—that was all.'

'A letter or two, milady,' suggested Needham, who had been giving her evidence.

'Of no value to any one save the owner,' smiled Lady Arbuthnot, and her husband smiled back at her, for he knew she kept his letters.

'Well, it is lucky it wasn't worse!' he said consolingly, 'it might have been the diamonds. And if I were you,' he added to the police officer, 'I'd let Mr. Lucanaster know at once, even if, as you say, it's wiser to keep the matter dark for a day or two. He is always buying jewels, and even if the thieves don't take the pearls to him direct, they might try and trade them off to the royal family, and then *he* is sure to hear of it in the end—he is always having dealings with them.'

CHAPTER II

THE KITE-FLYERS

'BRING me more paste, women, and see there be no lumps in it; the last was fit to ruin a body's reputation,' said Lateefa, the kite-maker, as he sate on the ground in one of the arched nooks which surrounded the wide sunlit courtyard of a large native house. It had been a sort of city palace to the dead dynasty, and was now occupied by Jehân Aziz, the Rightful Heir's, family. It was built of stucco, simulating marble; stucco decayed, fast crumbling to dust, so leaving scars, where once there had been ornaments.

The speaker was an old man, though his sleek oiled hair, square-cut in the royal fashion just below the ear, showed no streak of grey. On one side of him lay the raw material of his craft; on the other a swift-growing pile of the manufactured article ready for sale in the bazaar, after his master, Jehân Aziz, prince of kite-flyers, should have taken his choice. That Lateefa himself was prince of kite-makers could be judged from the way in which he bent the bamboo slips to a perfect curve, and held them thus by three dabs of paste and a sheet of tissue paper. It was a miracle of dexterity.

There were two women in the courtyard, one a girl about sixteen, who was lounging lazily behind Lateefa, the other a woman of sixty, dressed in ragged dirty garments, who was spinning as for dear life an arch or two farther down. After a pause, during which she looked almost appealingly at the girl, the latter rose and limped towards an inner court, for Khôjeeya Khânum was slightly lame; slightly deformed also, owing to her lameness.

'Keep the lumps to our dinners, Auntie Khôjee!' called the girl with a pert titter; 'for what with paste and the kites

it makes we good women have scarce flour left to fill our stomachs!'

Lateefa, after watching the limp disappear, glanced round at the girl. She was a buxom creature, over-developed for her years, and over-dressed in the cheap finery of Manchester muslin at six *pice* a yard and German silver earrings at two *annas* a dozen.

'Thy sort of good woman need never starve, niece Sobrai,' he said (for he was connected by some by way of blood to the Heirs of All Things or Nothing), 'I have told thee that before. There is not a drop of her blood in thee,' he nodded to the inner door. 'I mean no blame; some daughters must favour the father. Indeed, I marvel ever there be so few to do it in this family, since, God knows! we men be debauched enough to outweigh the virtue of the sainted Fâtma herself.' He shook his head and began on a new kite.

'Thou knowest *that* better than I,' retorted Sobrai sharply; 'though thy memory, Uncle Lateef, can scarce hold the poor souls thou hast injured thereby.'

His deft hands left their work, and the supple fingers spread themselves in emphatic denial. 'Not a one! niece, not a one!' he protested, 'Lateefa makes kites, not souls. I take men and women as they came from their Maker's hands—as I came. For, see you, if my kites fly, as I make them fly, why not His souls?'—he paused for a thin musical laugh which suited his thin acute face—'I say not,' he went on, 'that thou art botched by being built another fashion, but that her life,' he nodded again to the inner or women's court, 'is not for such as thee—that thou hadst best appraise thine own needs betimes.'

'May be I have already,' sneered the girl insolently, 'and without thy help, pander!'

He turned on her swiftly. 'Have a care, girl! have a care! In vice, as in virtue, the old ways are safest. So listen not to that woman from cantonments whom the Nawâb brings hither when he entertains. Ah! think not I have not seen thee stealing down on the sly to have a word with her.'

Sobrai gave a half-abashed titter. 'And to Dilarâm *thy* friend of the city also! Lo! uncle! What is there to choose between them or their trade either? "*If one comes to dance, what matters a veil?*" And if the Nawâb would keep

his women old-fashioned, why doth he bring Miss Leezie to the house? Ah! say not 'tis only to this outer court where we virtuous need see nothing; for "*'tis only the blind cow which hath a separate byre,*" and my sight is good——'

'And thy heart bad,' added Lateefa dispassionately, as she stood shifting one foot to and fro after the manner of dancing-girls. 'Still, since God made thee, as I make kites, thou wilt doubtless fly thine own way—if thou canst find some one to hold the string! It needs that ever.'

She began a retort, but checked herself as Khôjeeya reappeared with the paste in a green leaf cup.

'Thy work brings quick return, Lateef,' said the old lady, pausing to look wistfully at the growing pile of kites, 'but my wheel twirls for two hours to a farthing tune.' She edged closer and brushed a speck of dirt from the kite-maker's board in wheedling fashion, then went on, 'Couldst not spare me something to-day, Lateef, against the boy's medicine? He needs it sorely, and Noormahal hath not had a *cowrie* from the Nawâb since the races. Dost know what he lost? He says all, but he lies often.' She spoke without a suspicion of blame, simply as if the fact—being a dispensation of Providence—was neither to be questioned nor resented.

Lateefa laughed airily. 'Lose!' he echoed, 'Jehân hath naught to lose, not even credit. He sets free of fate! "*He who bathes naked has no clothes to wring!*" 'Tis Salig Râm, his usurer, whose fat flesh quivers lest his tame pensioner should die prematurely. So take heart, my good Khôjee! Things cannot grow worse, or, for that matter, better, since Jehân's affairs are as a slipped camel in the mud. They can neither go back nor forward. For, see you, he must not die of starvation, lest the pension lapse; nor must he live riotous beyond reason, lest once more the pension lapse through his death by surfeit. Would to God I had such leading-strings to comfortable, clean living myself! But none cares for Lateefa's soul or body. So fret not, Khôjee, concerning Jehân. And as for the boy, canst not take the child to the "Duffri'n Hospitar'l" and get physic free? Plenty women go thither, they tell me.'

'Ay! of sorts; but not we,' replied the old lady.

She drew her ragged veil tighter, but Sobrai tittered.

'Hark to her gentility! Yet she goes to the pawnshop,

Uncle Lateef, and does the house-marketing to boot—tut! auntie, wouldst pretend it is not so? As if our neighbours did not know us all but servantless! as if they could not tell worshipful Khôjeeya Khânum, king's daughter, below the domino, by the limp!'

The old worn face—it was one of those Providence meant for beauty, then marred—turned in deprecating apology to Lateefa, as representative of outraged propriety and proprietor.

'Some one must, *meean*,' she said meekly, 'for Ameenan hath but two hands and two feet; yet another set would mean another mouth to feed. Besides, I grow so old, brother; there is no fear.' The faint forlornness and regret of the excuse made Lateefa's sharp face soften.

'Heed not what Sobrai says, sister,' he replied. 'Lo! thy virtue would stand stiff in a brothel; hers grows giddy looking over a wall; so she doth not understand——'

'Not understand!' retorted the girl shrilly. 'Mayhap I understand too much for old folk and old ways. I hold not with lick-spittling men-folk who wander "Englis fassen," yet would keep us in the old path—who say, as their grand-dads did, that "*cattle and women must rub along in their tethers*," but claim a long string to their own kites.'

Lateefa interrupted the tirade with a chuckle. 'Since they are able to hold it! but as I told thee, 'tis the mud in the gutter for the gayest of gay petticoats'—he laid his hand on the growing pile of kites—'if they try to soar alone.'

'I will not ask thee to hold mine, anyway,' she retorted, flouncing off in a meditated whirlwind. For Lateefa was right. Sobrai was not born of those who are patient in well-doing. Even without experience, her manners were those of a different model.

Aunt Khôjee looked after her fearfully, then once more turned to representative man in apology. 'Here are ill words, *meean*,' she began tremulously, 'yet God knows how hard it is to keep girls silent when the world about them hath grown so noisy. In the old days neighbours were of one's own sort; now, if they be ready to pay full rent, that is enough. I say naught against ours—though, good or bad, it was ill done of Alidâd, our cousin, to let the house his fathers died in. Still they be decent folk enough, though the son is a

balister.[1] But, see you, since he returned from England he hath taken his wife to live as a *mem* beyond the city. And she hath set his sisters agog to learn, as she learns, of a *miss* from the *missen*. So what with all this talk, and the railway whistle so close, and Sobrai gossiping as girls will over the partitions——'

Lateefa's thin laugh positively crackled. 'Said I not her virtue would not withstand a wall? But heed her not, sister. She is right, *for Sobrai*! Thou art right, for *Khôjeeya Khânum!* Ye are both God-bred, God-fed! Except concerning houses—*there* thou art wrong,' he added, giving the old lady a shrewd tentative look. 'Dead folk should remain in their graves and leave the letting of houses to the living. I deem Alidâd wise, for, as the old saw says, "*an empty house is the wasp's estate.*" Jehân should do the like with this, if the Nawâbin would consent to live elsewhere.'

'Elsewhere?' echoed Khôjee, aghast. 'Where else should Noormahal live but in her own house?'

'In a smaller one. Look! saw you ever such a wilderness of a place for five women and a child!'

He swept a derisive finger round the wide courtyard, the terraced arcades, the storied vista of the *zenan-khana*, the half-fortified gateway, where the royal peacocks still spread their broken plaster tails. And as he did so the flood of yellow sunshine, as if in answer, betrayed every cranny in the cracked brickwork, every scar in the mouldering stucco.

''Tis as a stone on the tail of a kite, sister,' he went on, 'a burden not to be borne by frailty that can scarce support itself.' He had, as he spoke, been tying his morning's work together ere taking it to the bazaar, and now he stood balancing a balloon-like bundle, almost as big as himself, upon his hand; but he emphasised his remark by withdrawing that support, then, ere the kites touched ground, catching the bundle again, so holding them suspended. 'It needs some one to keep feather brains from the gutter,' he continued gravely, 'and thou, Khôjee, art the only body in this house with sense. Khâdjee, thy sister, hath decorum, Sobrai desires, and Noormahal, poor soul, dreams! So let me speak thee soberly. Thou hast heard of this plague, sister?'

[1] Barrister.

Khôjee cracked all her fingers wildly, to avert evil, ere quavering, 'Who hath not? Hath it come, Lateefa? Shall we be all sent to hospital and poisoned?'

The crackling laugh echoed again. 'Fools' tales, woman, fools' tales. Why should the *Huzoors* trouble? Have they not soldiers and guns wherewith to kill?'

'But they have driven out the *Mimbrâns*[1]-committee; they have taken possession of all things. Hâfiz Ahmad's wife, who lives as a *mem*, said so. She said her husband——'

The laugh crackled again. 'Ay! he is *mimber*, yet he knows which side of the wall to jump. And what be the rights and wrongs of the quarrel, I know not; but, as thou sayest, the *Huzoors* have taken the reins once more, for the plague is nigh. So they are meddling with God's work, and finding *hospitar'ls* and who knows what. And Hâfiz Ahmad, for all his grievance, hath recommended his father's —yea! Khôjee, the neighbouring house—as *hospitarl*. So, see you, sister, if folk were wise the *hospitarl* might come to them, and a swinging rent beside; since Behâri Lal, the town clerk, told me the doctors said they must have both houses or neither—they were so nigh. Here, then, is Noormahal's chance. Let her claim a writing for half-rent, since, having right of occupancy by her marriage-dowry, Jehân cannot let without her consent. That would stop wheel-spinning for bare bread, sister.'

But Khôjee's thoughts were not for herself. 'Can the *Huzoors* make us go,' she quavered; 'can they force her?'

Lateefa shrugged his shoulders. 'Nay! nay! but if she choose.'

'Then is that the end,' interrupted Khôjee, with a sigh of relief. 'Noormahal will never choose. She hath but two things left of kingship—and it comes closer through her than through Jehân, mind you, though, being woman she hath no claim like he—two things, the house and the ring! And she will keep both—for her boy.'

Lateefa had his gay balloon balanced afresh on his palm.

'If she can keep the boy,' he said sardonically; 'but even kites are ill to hold with a rotten string.' So, balancing his burden of nothingness from one hand to another, as jugglers play with a ball, he passed out under the broken plaster

[1] Members of Municipal Committee.

peacocks, singing significantly, in his high reedy voice, the dirge of motherhood which so often echoes out into the Indian sunshine from behind closed doors—

'O child! who taught thee to deceive?
O child! who taught thee thus to leave
My throning arms? Didst thou not say
Thou wert their king for aye?
So soon dost thou deceive?
So soon hast learnt to leave
Thy sonship's crown?
To fling it down.
Thy throne
Is lone.
Ah, me! ah, me!'

It fell on Khôjeeya Khânum's ears, making her heart sink with its implied warning; for a child doomed to disease, like little Sa'adut, the heir to the Heirship of Nothingness, was but faint hold on the soaring honours of royalty. And Jehân Aziz, his father, was a fainter one still. Rumours had come, even to the wide ruined courtyard, of official reprimands, of threats. What wonder, when even the more reputable members of the royal family looked askance at his doings?

Still he was master in that house, and as that was his day for the weekly visit of ceremony he vouchsafed to his lawful wife, it behoved Khôjee to prepare for it after established rule.

Khâdeeja Khânum, Khôjee's twin sister, had already done her share of preparation. She had put on her best pink satin trousers and a spangled green veil, in which she sate, squatted on a string bed set in the women's court, and sewed at a tinsel cap for the head of the house—that being the correct etiquette on such occasions.

And Khâdeeja was far more correct than Khôjeeya. In fact, her position in the household was quite different, seeing that she had been betrothed in her youth to an ancient suitor who died before she was old enough to be claimed, while no one had ever made a bid for Khôjee's limp. So, while the latter's few trinkets had a trick of remaining with the pawnbroker, Khâdjee's never paid even a temporary visit to that official.

Then her clothes, from that decorous sitting on string beds instead of breathless spinning in the dust, remained

so spick and span, that Noormahal, poor soul! when money ran scarce for the heir's medicine, would accuse the general scapegoat of extravagance in providing them. On these occasions Khôjee never retorted that the white muslin in which the Nawâbin denied herself was, in the end, more expensive. Neither did she meet Khâdjee's demand for more tinsel with the brutal truth that the caps were too old-fashioned for Jehân Aziz to wear. Family facts of this sort she did not even divulge in her prayers; for Khôjeeya Khânum's religion, like her life, was strictly impersonal. It could be nothing else, since it was barely decent for a woman to intrude even her own salvation on a Creator whose attributes were distinctly masculine!

So, while Khâdjee sewed and Noormahal cuddled the sleeping Sa'adut as she crouched on another bed, Khôjee dragged out the state carpet—whence all the state and most of the carpet had retired in favour of bare string—set the cushions, prepared the pipe, the sherbet, and the hand punkah, lest the master should be fatigued by his condescension; for, to her, all these ceremonies were a sort of sacrament to any intercourse between the sexes, without which it was distinctly improper, and with which it was possible to receive even a scapegrace with benefit to yourself.

Having done all this, she crossed to Noormahal, and, crouching beside the bed, began, with a crooning song, to massage the long slender limbs tucked up under the long slim body. For her niece, though not half her age, was Nawâbin—as such, mistress of the house.

'Nay, auntie,' remonstrated Noormahal in a deep full voice; 'thou also wert up all night with the boy, and art as tired as I.'

'Trra!' retorted Khôjeeya; 'old hemp hath fibre, young hemp flower; and 'twill freshen thee against thy man's coming.' The almost pathetic raillery in the old face which had never known a lover's kiss was quite charming, but Noormahal frowned.

'Better prepare the child's food,' she said, shrinking even from the touch of *those* caressing hands. 'Mayhap his father will be glad if *he* looks better.'

Her voice, low for her race and sex, suited the fine aquiline face, whose fairness was enhanced by the exceeding darkness of the large melancholy eyes. These in their expression

matched the extreme passivity of face and figure—a passivity which held no trace of supineness. For the rest, there was much ignorance and obstinacy in the face, but nobility in both.

She sate, curiously immovable, until Khôjee reappeared with a cup of milk. It was a Jubilee cup, with clasped hands of union upon it, and a portrait of the Queen-Empress surrounded by flags and mottoes. And Noormahal held it to the lips of the little heir to Nothingness or All Things with tender cajoleries.

'Wake up, my heart! Wake! light of mine eyes! Wake! little king!' she murmured, and under her lavish kisses the boy roused to smile, first at her, then at the cup, finally at the old woman who knelt, holding his little bare feet in her wrinkled hand, as if they were a gift. He was a pretty child, despite the ominous scars on the brown velvet of his skin, the hoarse pipe in his childish treble. A lively laddie too, and arrogant from kinglike ignorance of denial.

So Khôjee limped for more sugar, Noormahal wheedled him into another sip or two, Khâdeeja from her tinsels murmured blessings, and even Sobrai (dismissed by the proprieties from the court against the master's visit) giggled from a balcony at Sa'adut's insolence, and called to her girl-friends over the wall that he was a pea of the right pod and no mistake!

Certainly his lordliness was matched by Jehân Aziz when the latter stalked in, without a word of welcome for the three women who stood up *salaaming* profoundly. Yet even he paid court to the child, and, yielding to the implied command of outstretched arms, took Sa'adut to share the cushion of state on the state carpet.

They were a quaint pair this father and son, dressed alike in wrinkled white calico tights, velvet vests, flimsy gauze overcoats, and round tinsel caps set far back on the white parting of their sleek hair; such a startling white parting, considering the brownness of their skins!

The likeness between the two was, in a way, ghastly; the more so because the man's face bore no trace of the suffering which was written so clearly on the boy's.

Noormahal, watching them with empty arms, noticed this with a fierce unreasoning jealousy for her child. Yet there was a deeper, fiercer jealousy than this in the big brooding

eyes which took in every detail of the man who, scented, oiled, was all too perceptibly attired for conquest elsewhere. She hated him, it is true, but in India the marriage-tie is not a sentiment, it is a tangible right. And so, still young, still comely, Noormahal felt none of the passionate repulsion which a Western woman would have felt. Her wish, her claim, was to force her husband back to her with contumely. Was he not hers, to be the father of other heirs, if this one found freedom?

But contumely was out of the question. Jehân Aziz still had the green gleam of the kingly emerald on his finger. That must first come back to her safe hoarding, as, by solemn agreement, it always came after the rare occasions—such as the race meeting—when it had to blazon its claims before the world. And now the races were over, where Jehân said he had lost all. All the more reason the ring should come quickly. So, when Sobrai, from above, challenged Jehân's leer by peeping and nodding, there was no need for Aunt Khôjee to sidle between the mistress of the house and the flagrant impropriety, like a hen between her ducklings and the water. Noormahal would have allowed more insult than that to pass unnoticed. She sate passive, brooding, wondering when Jehân would begin on the subject. And all around the group the still sunshine burdened the half-ruined courtyard with a cruel light.

It was one of Khâdeeja's pious benedictions with which she embroidered truth as she embroidered her tinsel caps, which drove the stillness from that elemental group of man, woman, and child, that Trinity for Good or Evil in which the veriest agnostic must believe.

The sight, she asserted, of such a father and such a son filled her soul with certainty that a Merciful Creator would preserve the child to take his father's place.

'And wear the signet of his kingly ancestors,' put in Noormahal, seizing her opportunity. Her challenge smote the sunshine keen as a sword-thrust; with all her desire for diplomacy she could not help it coming. Jehân glared at her furiously for a second; but irritation at a wife soon passes when, as in India, she is no tie—unless she is beloved, and Noormahal was not. Besides, the broaching of the subject was a relief, since it had to be broached somehow; even though the negotiations with Mr. Lucanaster had gone

no further than a promise of first refusal should the ring be sold. Not that he, Jehân, had as yet seriously considered sale; but even so, if Salig Râm, the usurer, were to be persuaded to loan money on the ring's security, it must not be returned to Noormahal's keeping.

Therefore, seeing that little Sa'adut would be at once his shield and his weapon in the fight which was bound to come between himself and the passionate woman whose eyes blazed at him, he turned to the child with a laugh and a caress. 'Yea, Sa'adut! thou shalt wear the ring; father will keep it for thee.'

The answer came swift. 'And why not mother, as heretofore?' Auntie Khôjee sidled again in deprecation of such a tone towards the master. Jehân himself would have given his fighting quail (source of his only steady income) to answer this woman as he answered other women; but he could not. The child, the only child which had come to his reprobate life, was her shield, her weapon also. He looked at this tie between them almost resentfully, and thrust it once more to the van of fight.

'Because, Sa'adut, mother hath had it long enough. Hath she not, sonling? It is father's turn now, is it not?'

Sa'adut's big black eyes—they had all his mother's melancholy, with a childish wistfulness superadded to their velvet depths—looked from the woman's face to the man's, from his mother's face to his father's; and a vague perplexity, a still vaguer consciousness of a hidden meaning, came to his childish mind. What did they want, these big people who always took so much upon themselves? Unless *he* expressed a wish, when theirs had to give way.

Suddenly he rose to his feet, a mite of mankind between those two imperious, undisciplined natures which had so thoughtlessly called his into being. The veriest atom of humanity, and yet, by reason of its frailty, its inexperience, more imperious, more undisciplined than that from which it sprung.

'Give it to me, myself!' came his hoarse pipe arrogantly; 'give it to Sa'adut! He will keep it himself. Give it, I say! Give it!'

The claim to individual life in a thing to which you have given life, startled even this father and mother. They paused, uncertain.

So in a second, ear-piercing shrieks of amazed disappointment rent the air, and there was Khôjee on her knees attempting pacification, while Khâdjee from her tinsels implored immediate gratification.

'Give it him, Nawâb-*sahib*!' she fluttered. 'Lo! he will die in a fit; it is ill denying a child; thou canst take it back when he tires of the plaything.'

'Yea! give it him, *meean*,' pleaded Khôjee, all of a tremble. '"*A child's cry in a house is ill-luck*"; thou canst take it back when he sleeps.'

The suggestion struck the keynote of another resentment in Noormahal, making her forget the vague opposition which the child's claim had raised. She caught Sa'adut to her sharply, making that claim her own; for now, thinking only of his helplessness, his cries hurt her physically, making prudence impossible.

'Yea, give it him, Jehân Aziz, Son of Kings!—give it him in jest for a while. It is easy for a father to steal his son's right from him while he sleeps!'

Jehân sprang to his feet with a fearful curse; for the tempest of ungovernable anger which had come to that elemental group in the still sunshine, had brought with it the usual sense of personal outrage on personal virtue which alone makes quarrel possible.

'Steal—didst say steal?' he echoed. 'Ay, but 'tis as easy for a wife to steal from her husband when he wakes! Fool! When I wrung the betrothal pearls from thee last year, didst think I did not know there was a string short? Didst think I could not count them round my mother's neck when she held me, a child——'

Noormahal paled, yet faced him with a scornful laugh. 'Thou didst forget to count the string she sold when thy father refused her bread; it runs in the blood, Nawâb-*jee*!'

His look was fiendish now. 'That is a lie, woman! and thou knowest it. The English took them, as they take all things. Besides, have I not dallied with them round thy neck since then, at my pleasure? What! are they there still?' he went on mockingly, as Noormahal's hand all unconsciously found the slim throat hidden by the folds of her veil. 'Didst keep them against the chance of my return?'

She glared at him helplessly, yet almost forgetful of the brutality of his insult in a greater wrong. 'It was for the

child, thou knowest,' she said, in a muffled voice; 'for his bride—as it was for thine, Jehân; as it hath been ever for every bride in the king's house.'

Her words which came, not from meekness but red-hot rage, made even Jehân Aziz flinch, so that he had to bolster himself up with fresh anger ere replying.

'And *I* let thee think me a fool. *I* took no notice for the boy's sake too.' This new reading of his own cowardice restored his sense of virtue, and with it his courage. 'But now, thief!' he went on, 'since thou hast dared to even me to thyself, as well as think me fool, give me my pearls! Dost hear?—the pearls!'

She drew herself up superbly. 'I called thee traitor,' she cried; 'that is enough for thee.'

'And thief for thee. Well, traitor and thief are fitting mates! Let us kiss and make friends on that comradeship!'

She returned his insolent leer with a cold stare for one second; then, in the headlong repulsion from the least tie to him, tore the pearls from their hiding-place and flung them on the ground. They fell; the string snapping, to scatter a few of its milk-white beads about the worn carpet of state.

Even Jehân hesitated; then the sight of what meant money overcame his dignity, and he stooped to gather up the prize. The action gave him time for quick thought. This windfall might serve a double purpose. By selling it cheap to Lucanaster-*sahib* he could stave off the bigger question of the emerald for a bit, and at the same time raise enough to pay his more pressing debts. Both these considerations brought such a flavour of pure piety to his task, that by the time he had finished it he turned magnificently to his heir who, silenced from all save sobs by his elder's passion, was being comforted by Khôjee, while Khâdjee whimpered like a puppy on her string bed.

'Lo! Sa'adut,' he said, 'take thy ring, sonling! but give it not to thy mother to hoard if thou wouldst grow to wear it, since thou mayst starve the while! But that is her doing, not mine, who would let this house—where I was *called* thief, and *found* one—and give thee proper care, if I had my choice. So, I take my leave of it for ever!'

Khôjee, still on her knees beside the child, turned in swift alarm. 'Peace go with my lord,' she said, her head at his

very feet; 'the outer courtyard will be ready as ever for the entertainment——'

He interrupted her mockingly. 'I must learn to take my pleasure elsewhere, noble aunt; 'twill be an easier task than finding it here.' So, with an insolent stare at his wife, he strutted out jauntily

'Didst hear?' quavered Aunt Khôjee. Khâdeeja Khânum's answering whimper was almost a howl; but Noormahal said nothing. She was thinking of her tormentor's words about the child. Was it true that the price of the ring might save her darling?

For the present, however, the ring itself satisfied him. Appeased even from sobs, he was engrossed in finding out which of his tiny fingers went nearest to filling up its gold circlet. As he did so the green gleam of the emerald shone broadly, unbrokenly; for, as Mr. Lucanaster had often told his Paris principals, the legend scratched on it was so faint that a turn of the wheel would obliterate it. Yet there it was as yet.

'*Fuzl-Ilahi, Panah-i-deen.*'

Which, being translated, is, 'By the Grace of God Defender of the Faith.'

Words which have caused much shedding of blood and tears.

But Sobrai Begum found laughter in the storm they had provoked.

''Twas only Jehân and Noormahal squabbling over the old ring,' she tittered over the wall in answer to a query. 'In the end, she gave him the last of the pearls to pacify him. I would have used them to better purpose had I had the luck to have my hand on them!' And as she sullenly obeyed Aunt Khôjee's call to help, she told herself that two or three even of the pearls would have brought her freedom; would have given her, as Uncle Lateef had expressed it, that some one to hold the string of her kite, without which aid independence was impossible. For Sobrai had no mind for the gutter.

So the pearls, if she had them——

She gave a little gasp; in folding up the state carpet, four milk-white beads rolled out from its worn strings.

She glanced round her hastily.

Khâdjee was wiping the dimness of past tears from her spectacles, Khôjee was replacing the cushions, Noormahal

was brooding over Sa'adut, who had fallen asleep with both his thumbs thrust into the ring, as they thrust the fingers of a corpse which might otherwise come back to disturb the living with what should be buried and forgotten.

There was no one to see. And no one to know; for Jehân would sell or pawn the remainder, none the wiser. Even if he suspected anything he would make no inquiries, since these sales were done in secret.

She had no pocket, and to tie her prize in the corner of her veil would attract attention. So she slipped the pearls into her mouth, and held her tongue even when Aunt Khôjee scolded at her for not being quicker. Such silence paid better than any retort, and it also gave her time to mature her plans. One thing was certain, she must make her push for freedom before there was any chance of discovery, for it was just possible Jehân might know the number of the pearls. The sooner the better, as far as she was concerned, since she had long made up her mind to accept Miss Leezie's offer—with a suitable fee—of educating her to that walk in life. She could not remain dowerless, unwed, within four walls all her life! And if one had to amuse oneself, was it not better to do it openly, in a recognised, almost respectable fashion, which was countenanced even by the *Huzoors*?

As she made her plans, Jehân on his way to his bachelor quarters in the worst bazaar in Nushapore was making his, and settling that he would certainly lead that pig of an infidel, Lucanaster, to think he would in the end yield the emerald, by letting him have the pearls cheap, under promise of silence.

This was imperative, partly for the sake of honour; mostly because Salig Râm, the usurer, might object to any one else getting them.

CHAPTER III

COBWEBS

THE noonday sun lay shadowless in every nook of the narrow evil-smelling courtyard which formed a common exit to Jehân Aziz's bachelor quarters and three or four other houses whose fronts faced the most disreputable bazaar in Nushapore. One of these belonged to Dilarâm, the dancer, and the remaining ones were tenanted by folk of similar tastes, such as Burkut Ali, the Delhi pensioner, whom Jack Raymond had styled the biggest brute in Asia; but *he* had a double reasoning for choosing the courtyard, in that it enabled him better to play his part of Buckingham to the Rightful Heir.

Despite its character, however, the courtyard was peace and propriety itself in the perpendicular glare of noon; peaceful and proper with a dreamy drugged peace, a satiated propriety that was in keeping with the heavy yellow sunshine.

And Dilarâm herself matched the general drowsiness as she sate, muffled in a creased shawl, yawning, blowsy, ill-kempt, upon a wooden balcony overlooking the courtyard. She matched the squalor of the scene also; a squalor which seemed to put the pleasure that has its marketable value out of possibility in such surroundings.

Jehân Aziz, who sate on a string bed below, looked a trifle less dilapidated than Dilarâm, for his morning toilet had extended to the making of that white parting down the middle of his oiled hair, and a due shaving into line of his thin moustache. Not that these results were due to any energy on his part. They were the work of the barber, who was now occupied, nearer the door, in paring Burkut Ali's nails, while the Heir to Nothingness, in no hurry to proceed, chewed betel thoughtfully, and looked at a caged quail which

he meant to fight against a rival's so soon as he could rouse himself sufficiently to dress; for he had got no further in the way of clothing than the wrinkled white calico trousers which, by reason of their tightness, have to be tenant's fixtures during the term of occupation

'So Sobrai Begum hath flitted at last!' yawned Dilarâm (who was within an aside of Jehân) with a sudden causeless access of indifference and malice. 'And Nawâb Jehân Aziz, *Rukn-ud-dowla-Hâfiz-ul-Mulk*, hath in consequence one less mouth to feed! Peace be with him!'

'Speak lower, fool, or the barber will hear, and the tale be spread over the town,' muttered Jehân savagely, scowling at the sarcasm of the titles.

A day and a night had passed since Aunt Khôjee, veiled to her finger-tips and fluttering like any pigeon, had fled through the bazaars to tell the head of her house that—not three hours after he had left it in wrath—Sobrai had disappeared. Jehân Aziz, after established custom, had kept the scandalous secret to himself and his immediate family, with the exception of Dilarâm, to whom he had gone at once, as the most likely person to have an inkling of the girl's intentions. For the only way to deal with such cases is to get the truant back as speedily as possible, and ensure a virtuous silence in the future. The silence, as a rule, of the grave. So the chance of the barber having extra long ears was horrible.

Dilarâm, however, glanced idly at the group by the door, which gave unreservedly on the gutters of a cramped alley, and yawned again. 'Not he! Burkut hath him gaping over signs and wonders that will be God's truth ere the whole of Nushapore be shaved! They are more to the barber's trade than a girl's flight; though that also goes far nowadays, what with all the talk about such things. And *this* would go far indeed, if set agoing—with a head of lie, and sparks of truth in its tail, like the powder in an E'ed[1] squib.'

'The truth!' echoed Jehân, in swift suspicion; 'then thou dost know somewhat, after all?'

She yawned again, smiling. 'Not I! Had none but my sort danced, as in old days, in kings' houses, Dilarâm would have known who else sought to flutter in her footsteps. But with new pleasures, Nawâb-*sahib*, come new pains. She is

[1] The Mohammedan Easter.

not of us in the city; that is sure. But there are baggages with bleached hair and powdered faces outside it. Ask Miss Leezie! I heard her say she lacked apprentices.' Her lazy spitefulness was effective, and Jehân clenched his fine hands viciously. He did not particularly desire to get Sobrai back —except for punishment—provided scandal could be avoided. He was, indeed, well quit of a girl for whom no suitor could be found, and who was not to his own personal taste; but the suggestion of Dilarâm's words stung horribly.

'God smite their souls to the nethermost hell!' he muttered, making the dancer flick her fingers with a giggle.

'Lo! hearken to virtue! "*Not a rag for the child and a coat for the cat!*" Men be no worse in cantonments than here in the city! Nevertheless the tale, as I said, could be told to a purpose by a clever tongue. It would rouse the common folk more than Burkut's lies about portents, or the *baboo*'s about the plague, if they only knew it!'

Jehân Aziz turned on her like a snake, sleepy yet swift, ready for dreams or death.

'If thou dost *dare* to tell——'

She held out her bare brown arm in a quick gesture of silence, and rising, swept him a *salaam* that set the hidden anklets beneath her dirty draperies a-jingling, and proclaimed her what she was—a passed mistress in the oldest of professions for women.

'There is no need, my lord,' she said superbly, 'to teach Dilarâm her duty to the virtuous women who sit free of shame in the noble houses where she dances. *We* learn that first of all.'

There was an indescribable grace in her attitude, a cadence in her utterance, which proved her claim. She was of the old school, educated to her craft.

The jingle of anklets brought a man's face to a neighbouring balcony. A face hollow-cheeked, haggard, with dissipation written on it. Brought thither by curiosity, it remained in approval of the studiously-posed figure in the creased shawl. Jehân's face, too, showed a like attraction, and Burkut Ali, the nail-paring over, lounged up with a savage sort of discontent at his own inward admiration—a regret, as it were, for the vices of his ancestors. As a rule, Dilarâm and her dancing did not amuse him in the very least. He had passed from the old style to the new, and, indeed, was chiefly

responsible for the introduction of Miss Leezie and her like to the nobility and gentry of Nushapore. But now he was conscious that this, in its way, was better; and the fact formed a fresh item in his general grievance against those who, having taken the reins of government from such as he, had driven India into change—even in its wickedness!

The secret cherishing of this general grievance of his own in the minds of others was Burkut Ali's whole occupation in life. The dilatory disaffection of his neighbours, a disaffection inevitable in a society which this change had literally ruined, could, he had discovered, be turned to his own profit in two ways. First, because, as confidant to seditious utterances, he gained a hold on the utterer; secondly, because, as the repeater of them to persons in high places, he gained a hold on the hearer. For the rest his manners were perfection, his Persian a pure pleasure to the ear. And both these were at their best when—his present part in the farce of vague conspirings being that of general backer-up of Jehân's spasmodic belief in his own claims to royalty—he paused before the heir in the most elaborately courtly fashion and began mellifluously—

'Hath it, perchance, found place in the memory of the Most High that this, being the death-day of the sainted lady ancestress Hâfiz Begum, the dirge for her soul will be intoned by the appointed canons at the family mausoleum? And as this will be the last time——'

'The last time?' echoed Jehân haughtily, 'how so?'

The man's face in the balcony sharpened with sudden interest. Between his dissipations he was editor of the vilest broadsheet in the town, a broadsheet which existed simply by virtue of its unfailing basis of firm falsehoods.

Burkut knew this, and had cast his fly dexterously. Now, feeling the rise, he allowed grave concern to overlay the yellow mask of his face—it was one of those which never change except by an effort of will. 'Because, sire,' he replied, in tones to be heard of all, 'it is known, beyond doubt, that the English Government, being hard pressed by reason of famines and the yearly tribute to the City of London, which the low value of the rupee causes to be greater every year, hath an eye on the endowment of the mausoleum.'

Govind the editor stifled a yawn of disappointment. 'That

tale is old,' he put in contemptuously, 'I heard it a week past from the Secretariat Office. My cousin is clerk—as I should have been but for injustice—and saw the papers. It is true; for see you, they closed the mints so as to make the poor folk sell their silver hoards cheap, and now the rupees are scarce.'

He nodded sagely over his own political economy, and as he spoke in Urdu, the barber, as newsmonger of an older type, paused in the sharpening of a razor to listen.

'Impossible!' interrupted Jehân angrily. 'The Government is bound to uphold the shrines and services by strict promises. My fathers only lent them the money on those conditions. The interest was to be spent——'

Govind burst into boisterous laughter; for his head was muddled, his nerves unstrung by an overnight debauch.

'Ay! Nawâb-*jee*. Crores and crores of rupees lent in the old days, and the interest spent now in gardens for the *mems* to play games in, and statues to their own Queen! But it is no new thing, I tell you. I am no ignoramus—I am *middle fail*.[1] I have read their histories, and I know. They took all the religious endowments in their own land, and'—he added louder, as an ash-smeared naked figure which had been passing along the alley with the beggar's cry of '*Alâkh Alâkh*' paused to listen—'would have killed the religious also but for those among them like Gladstone and Caine-*sahib* who say, as we do, that the others are tyrants and have no right to India.'

The hotch-potch of history was interrupted by Dilarâm's yawn. '*Hai! Hai!* brother!' she said, 'keep that dreary stuff for Burkut or the barber—they can spread it over folk's hot imaginings like butter on a hearth cake! Or give it to *jogi-jee* yonder,' she swept her fingers to the weird figure at the door; a figure whose right hand and arm, withered in the ceaseless task of appealing to high heaven for righteous ness, showed like a dry stick pointing upwards, 'though he and his like are never at a loss for lies. Hast a new one to-day, Gopi? Or is it still the old wonder of the golden paper which fell from the sky into one of Mother Kali's many embraces!'

'Jest not of Her, sister,' said the *jogi* in a theatrically hollow

[1] Failed for middle school examination; a very general claim to culture in India.

voice, as he thrust his left arm—lean as a lath, yet round in comparison with that raised claim to virtue—towards her in menace. 'Thou art Hers, even in thy denial of Her. Woman as She, spreading disease and death. Mother of Pain, embracing the world, biding thy time to slay.'

Despite the palpable striving for effect, something in the words thrilled the woman beneath the courtesan; and though she flicked all her supple fingers in derision, there was a note of triumph in her voice.

'Talk not to me, saint, as to thy Hindoo widows who believe in golden papers and gods. Yet 'tis true! We of the bazaar lead the world by the nose! Govind may blacken what he likes with ink. Burkut's craft may spend itself in spider's webs. The plague may come. Yea! even the sniffing out of other folk's smells—ay! and the payment for silence!—may be taken from the *Mimbrâns*-committee, and yet the world will wag peaceful. But touch *us* and it is different. Let none meddle with the men's women or with our will, or they meddle to their cost!'

She tucked the creased shawl closer around her, and squatted down once more in the sunshine; the heavy sunshine in which those others sate also with a sudden fierce approval in their hearts.

It was highest noon, and the sky was a blaze of molten light; so that the shadow from a wheeling kite overhead, as it sought with keen eyes amid the refuse of the city for some prize, circled in sharp outline about the squalid courtyard, falling on one figure, flitting to another, linking them together, as it were, by its hungry restless desire.

So, for a space, there was a drowsy silence, on which the beggar's cry for alms, as he went on his way pausing at every door in the cramped alley, rose monotonously.

After which, Burkut, stifling a yawn, suggested that if the Heir to all Things wished to receive his due recognition as head of the family at the mausoleum, it was time to commence dressing; whereupon Jehân yawned also, and demanded his shoes from Lateefa, who had just come in with a selected bundle of kites for choice against the evening flight.

'I shall need none to-day,' said Jehân sulkily. 'My good time hath to be wasted in dirges and prayers for a dead old woman who is naught to me. Then,' he added aside, half

to himself, with a frown, 'I must see Lucanaster—may he roast with fire!'

'If it please God!' assented Burkut piously. Then he added, 'If it is aught I can do—the hell-doomed being in my debt for some things—I might drive a better bargain, perhaps.'

Jehân had not breathed a word to any one of his windfall of pearls, but certain evidences during the last two days that he had, or expected to have cash, had raised Burkut's curiosity.

But Jehân had no intention of having any witness to his interview, least of all one to whom he owed money, so he turned on Burkut insolently.

'I need no man's offices, so keep thy right hand to wash thy left!'

If there was resentment behind Burkut Ali's yellow mask, the latter hid it successfully. 'Then I will but accompany the Nawâb to the mausoleum,' he said deferentially. 'Its owner cannot go unattended!'

It was a motley cargo which the rickety, red-flannel-lined wagonette (which Jehân's usurer allowed him as part of the stock-in-trade necessary for a pension-earner) carried to the stucco tombs of dead kings—for everything, including the dynasty itself, had been stucco at Nushapore! First there was the Heir in his second-best coatee of flowered green satin, then Burkut, burly in a yellow one to match, and Lateefa, despite his calico, gayer than either by reason of his inevitable kites. Finally there was the coachman in ragged livery, and three attendants in rags without the livery; literal hangers-on, clinging to the great scraper-like steps which seemed the only reliable portions of the vehicle.

It had not far to go, however, over the white road and through the clouds of dust; for the mausoleum stood just outside the city in a garden that was irresistibly suggestive of a *café chantant* by reason of its stucco statuary, its preparations for nightly illumination, and a generally meretricious scheme of decoration.

The tomb itself—squat, and bulging with inconsequent domes—stood on a plinth towards one end of the garden, and from it, as the wagonette discharged its load at the gates, came the sound of monotonous chanting. But this hesitated, paused, ceased in a murmur of 'the Nawâb!' as

Jehân, with a new dignity in his manner, passed up the steps, and so—with a *posse* of cringing officials who had hurried to meet him buzzing round like bees—entered the wide hall; for despite the domes, despite the minarets outside, this tomb of dead kings was nothing else within. It was just a vast oblong hall hung throughout its length with huge, dusty, cobwebbed, glass chandeliers which, taken in conjunction with the empty polished floor, were suggestive of a ball-room; the dancing-saloon of the *café chantant*!

In the very centre, however, of the emptiness was a low roly-poly tomb, above which rose a musty-fusty baldequin which had once been stately in velvet and pearls. But the moth had fretted new patterns on the curtains, and the cobwebs lay like torn lace on the canopy. Nevertheless, two faintly-smouldering silver censers, standing at the foot of the tomb, showed it not all neglected. And something else, witness to memory, lay between the censers, under a common glass shade such as covers the marble-and-gilt timepiece of a bogus auction, or the dusty waxen flowers of a cheap lodging.

It was the last Nawâb's turban of state.

For the rest, the hall lay empty save for its officials; the minor canons as it were, who still received the stipends set apart by the deceased kings for due daily chantings of dirges, and so clustered round Jehân with courtier-like *salaams*.

But not for long; since almost before they had conducted him to the royal pew—an inlaid square of flooring close to the baldequin—a fresh arrival sent them cringing and fluttering to greet it, with greed in their hungry faces; the faces of custodians to whom strangers give tips.

And this party of English tourists looked promising, if only from the reluctant way in which, in obedience to a notice on the door, they took off their hats, and then glanced round with the 'Thank-the-goodness-and-the-grace-which-on-my-birth-hath-smiled' expression which our race learns in the nursery. For this is a frame of mind which leads to a contemptuous tipping of inferior races.

'Guide says that's the last Johnnie's cap—beastly dirty, isn't it?' said one in a churchy whisper, and the others nodded in churchy silence. So, decorously—barring a faint desire to try the waltzing capabilities of the floor on the part of a

brother and sister in one corner—they hesitated round the building with the half-shy, half-defiant, 'thus far I *will* go but *no* further' reluctance to admit any interest in strange places of worship, which is also a sign of race.

And Jehân from his royal square watched them, oblivious of his prayers, until quite calmly, innocently, they included him as part of the show.

Then he rose and said to Burkut, who was praying to perfection behind—

'I stay not for this. And we are too soon, for all thy fuss of being late. 'Twill be a good half-hour ere the dirge begins. So I go to Lucanaster's.—Nay!' he added hastily, as Burkut began to rise also, 'thou canst stay here, and if any of note come in my absence, tell them I return.'

So with a cunning smile leavening his scowl at the tourists, he passed out. In truth he was glad of the excuse which made it possible to take no one but Lateefa, who was to be trusted—who indeed had to be trusted in all things, since he knew all things—with him to Mr. Lucanaster's house; for even if he had left Burkut outside during his interview, there was no saying what the latter might not have discovered, or say he had discovered, which would answer his purpose of pressure quite as well! For Jehân, like most of Burkut's acquaintances, was quite aware of the latter's method.

Five minutes after, therefore (since Mr. Lucanaster's house lay conveniently close to the city and his numerous clients there), Jehân found himself *tête-à-tête* with a shrewd commercial face intent on the scientific counting of a string of pearls with a paper-knife.

'Three, six, nine, twelve,' came Mr. Lucanaster's voice as the ivory slipped between the triplets of pearls.

'Fifty and five,' he said finally, and Jehân nodded.

'Fifty and five,' he assented. 'What will you give me for them, *Huzoor*?'

Mr. Lucanaster drew a despatch-box towards him, opened it, looked at a paper, and smiled lavishly.

'Nothing, Nawâb-*sahib*,' he said calmly; 'for, to begin with, there are five short on the string. There were sixty on it when it was stolen.'

Jehân nearly jumped from his chair. 'Stolen!' he echoed. 'It is a lie—they are mine—they were my mother's.'

The lavish smile continued. 'Exactly, Nawâb-*sahib*, the description says so; and they were stolen from Government House two nights ago.'

'But I tell you it is impossible—my house was wearing them——'

'Excuse me; but you sold your mother's pearls last year! I happen to know, because Gunga Mull, who bought them, was acting for me. You had refused my direct offer, if you remember, and you lost a thousand rupees in consequence. It is safer to trust me in the end, Nawâb-*sahib*,' put in Mr. Lucanaster suavely.

'But not one string,' protested Jehân, trying to be haughty. 'This one I kept, and if the *Huzoor* does not wish to buy, I can sell it elsewhere, as I did before.'

He stretched his hand for the string, but Mr. Lucanaster sate back in his chair dangling the pearls, and looked at the Rightful Heir as a spider looks at a fly.

'I wouldn't try if I were you, Nawâb-*sahib*,' he said slowly. 'It might lead to—to difficulties. And the coincidence is not very—very credible. But if you are really in need of money'—he spoke still more slowly—'there is always the emerald. Let me see! I offered you six thousand, didn't I?—well, let us say eight; and—and nothing to be said about—about these——' He passed the pearls deftly through his fingers as if appraising them, and added, 'They are really very fine pearls, Nawâb-*sahib*, quite noticeable pearls. I haven't seen better for a long time, so it is a pity they are unsaleable at present. By and by, perhaps, or in some other place——'

'Does the *Huzoor* mean——' began Jehân blusteringly.

Mr. Lucanaster looked up suddenly, sharply, drew the open despatch-box closer, dropped the pearls into it, and closed the box with a snap. 'I mean nothing, Nawâb-*sahib*, except that, for your own sake, those pearls had better stay there for the present. You will only be tempted to raise money on them in the bazaar, and as I—if I were asked my opinion, as I certainly should be—would say they were the stolen pearls, it is better not to run the risk of my having to give evidence.'

'I—I will complain—I will go to the commissioner,' stammered Jehân, completely taken aback.

'I wouldn't if I were you; a police inquiry would be the

devil to a man of your character; and meanwhile — until you let me have the emerald—here's something for current expenses.'

Jehân looked for a moment as if he would dearly have liked to fling the notes which Mr. Lucanaster pushed over the table to him back in the donor's face; but he refrained. Money was always something, and some of it might even go to pay the poisoning of this hell-doomed infidel, who dared to pretend he thought the pearls were stolen; for Jehân was shrewd enough to see the other's game. Not that it mattered whether he pretended to think, or really thought. The pinch lay in that threat of a police inquiry; and neither the truth nor the falsehood of a charge mitigated or increased the sheer terror of that possibility.

So Jehân, *minus* his pearls, but with five hundred rupees in his pocket, drove back to the tomb of his dead ancestors in a tumult of impotent anger. He felt himself closer in the toils than he had been, and—naturally enough in a man of his sort—the utmost of his rage was expended on the person over whom he had most power of retaliation—that is, on Noormahal.

Why, he asked himself, had he been fool enough to let her get hold of the emerald again? It had been within his reach, and now it was gone again—hoarded by a foolish woman for the sake of a barren honour.

Barren? No! not altogether barren! As he stood once more in the arched doorway of the mausoleum, this feeling came to assuage the sting of his treatment by Mr. Lucanaster, and yet to make its smart more poignant.

For the assemblage had gathered. The chandeliers were lit, and the myriad-hued flash of their prisms hid the dust, hid the cobwebs, and gave a new brilliance to the mourners gathered in their appointed places. The tourists were gone now. These were his own people. They were waiting for him.

As he paused, a new arrival entering by a side door paused also—paused right in front of him before the glass case containing the last king's turban of state. So, after *salaam*-ing to it profoundly, sought the square belonging to his rank.

Jehân gave a low savage laugh of satisfaction, and passed on to his.

Here it was the first! Here, at any rate, honour was his!

Burkut, watching him swagger over to his prayers, smiled. If this sort of thing went on, he would have his choice of fostering a real conspiracy or denouncing it. That was the best of having an open mind; at least two courses were always open to one.

So, when the dirge was sung, he went and paid his respects to one or two officials, and then, the time for gossip and kite-flying having arrived, joined the worst company in Nushapore, where he talked sedition and backed the paper nothingnesses as they dipped and rose an inch or two, only to fall again, until the dusk blotted their gay colours from the sky. But below the bastioned river wall abutting on the railway bridge, which was the favourite meeting-place of kite-flyers, the dusk brought out other colours to take their place; close at hand and farther off, half-way across the river, and right upon its farther shore, came red and green lights, steady as stars. Until, in the far distance, a red changed to green, the signals which had stood against the evening express dropped, and it showed upon the bridge like some huge glowworm, slackening speed as it came; for the station lay not two hundred yards from where the bridge ended in a semi-fortified gateway.

So the train slid past below the bastioned wall almost at a foot's pace, and half a dozen or more English lads, part of a fresh draft from England just up from Bombay, thrust their heads out of the window curious to see what this strange place, what this strange race with which they were to have so much to do, were like.

'Well! I am blowed if they aren't flyin' kites like Christians,' said one in a hushed voice, an' I thought they was all 'eathen, I did——'

CHAPTER IV

AN UNFORGOTTEN PAST

'MR. RAYMOND!'

Lady Arbuthnot's voice was insistent, yet soft. She wanted to rouse the sleeper without attracting attention, and now that the waning of daylight had ended out-door amusements, people had begun to drift into the club. The library tables were being rifled of the new picture papers, the smoking bar was fast filling with men, and sounds of women's laughter came from the quaint vaulted rooms where Badminton was being continued by electric light.

But an almost Eastern peace still lingered in certain nooks between the interlacing aisles of the building (which had once been the palace of kings)—and in one of these Grace Arbuthnot had run her quarry, Jack Raymond, to earth in a lounge-chair fast asleep over a French novel.

The remains of a stiff whisky-peg stood on a small table, and Grace Arbuthnot looked at it vexedly, then at the face, but half visible in the dim light; for the lamp had been deliberately turned down.

She had not seen it closely for twelve years except for those brief minutes at the race-meeting, now nearly a week ago; for, rather to her indignation, Mr. Raymond had not followed up the renewal of their acquaintance by calling. What is more, he had emphasised the omission by writing his name in the visitor's book, as a perfect stranger might have done. The fact had roused her antagonism; she had told herself that she would decline to have that past of theirs treated as if it were not past and forgotten. For though, ten years ago, she had certainly been engaged to Jack Raymond, they had broken off their engagement by mutual consent, with their eyes open; so it was foolish to fuss about

it now. And so, partly from this antagonism, partly from a diametrically opposite motive—the inevitable woman's desire to keep some hold on the man she has once loved—it had occurred to her, when the days passed and brought no news of the missing jewel-box, that if she were to consult any one regarding the letter, it might be well to choose Jack Raymond. He was one, she knew, absolutely to be trusted by any woman; his position—miserable as it was from an official point of view—gave him unusual opportunities of being able to help her; and finally—— Why! Oh! why should he go off at a tangent and make her feel responsible?

And yet, as she looked at his sleeping face, noting its change, the unfamiliarity where once all had been so familiar, she frowned and turned as if to go, wondering what had induced her to think of consulting this man. What could *he* do now? Once upon a time, when he was different—when he was, as she recollected him——

The thought softened her face, and sent her back to call again, 'Mr. Raymond!'

He did not stir. Was the whisky-peg responsible for the soundness of his sleep? And was she responsible for the whisky-peg? She had known for years that he had drifted away, as it were, from everything that made life seem worth living to her, but the contrast between her fate and his had never come home to her before. The wife of a Lieutenant-Governor—as *he* might have been if he had not thrown up the service in a pet—and the Secretary to the club! What a miserable failure for such a man! A man who for two long years had been her ideal—who even now could do, should do—— She bent towards him suddenly, quite irrationally, and whispered, '*Jack!*'

As she paused expectant, there was a half-mischievous smile in her pretty eyes; and yet they held a suspicion of tears. It was such an odd world. Why could not a woman forget when she had ceased to care? Men did; this one certainly had—no!——

The still small voice had apparently taken time to filter through to its destination; but it had found the chord of memory, and struck it sharply.

'Yes! what is it, dear?' came the answer drowsily. Then Jack Raymond stirred, stared, finally woke to facts.

'I beg your pardon, Lady Arbuthnot,' he began, rising

hurriedly, 'I had been playing some hard games at racquets and——'

'But you always do sleep about this time, don't you? I've noticed you in the distance,' she said coolly. The suggestion in her words that she still had some right to criticise, added to his surprised irritation at finding that he had somehow gone back to the past. Why the deuce should the memory of the very inflection of her voice as she used to say 'Jack' have come back to confuse his brain, and absolutely make his heart beat?

'Yes!' he replied, with palpable hardihood, 'you're right. I generally do sleep. There's nothing else to do, you see, between tennis and whist. But if you want any stores from the go-down,[1] I am quite at your commands. There is an awfully good Stilton on cut, if you'd like some.'

She beat her foot impatiently. This thrusting forward of his duties as a sort of high-class grocer was *impayable*! He *could* not think she had sought him out in order to buy Stilton cheese of him! And yet—how like the old headstrong Jack it was!

'Do tennis and whist make up your day now, Mr. Raymond,' she said swiftly. 'It used not to be so.'

The reproach in her voice was plain, and he resented it. She had left him to go his own way, and he had gone it. What business was it of hers now?

'You forget the racing and the betting,' he answered coolly; 'and my incurable idleness has at least this virtue—it leaves me, as I said, at Lady Arbuthnot's disposal.'

He gave a little formal bow, which sent another pang of memory through her. The fact annoyed her. How intolerable it was, that despite his degeneration into a high-class grocer—here she smiled faintly—he could scarcely speak a word to her, here in the semi-darkness—they two alone—without bringing back—— Ah! so much! Yes! it was intolerable. It must be ignored; or rather the solid, sensible facts must be dragged out into the daylight and given their real significance.

'I am glad of that,' she replied, 'for I want you to help me. But let us sit down—people will be less likely to disturb us then.'

He obeyed, feeling restive under her calm superiority, yet

[1] In India, members can buy provisions or wines imported by their club.

admiring it. She was no failure, anyhow; he had been right in his choice, years ago. Not that it mattered; since all that had once been between them had been forgotten—by him at any rate. Absolutely forgotten.

'Mr. Raymond!' she began suddenly, leaning closer to him over the table, 'surely it would be foolish in either of us to be ashamed, or to pretend forgetfulness of the close tie that was between us—once.'

'I have not forgotten,' he said involuntarily, then paused disconcerted at his own collapse. Which was true, his denial or affirmation of memory? Both, in a way.

She smiled, as women do, at remembrance, even when they believe they wish forgetfulness.

'I said pretend, Mr. Raymond!' she corrected. 'We are not likely to forget. Why should we?'

'On the other hand, why should we remember?' he asked. 'The past, Lady Arbuthnot, is past.'

The very idea of his thinking it necessary to assert this made her frown.

'Exactly so; therefore I come to you because memory gives me a friend, nothing more. And I need a friend just now.'

'You have plenty of them to choose from,' he began, 'you always had——'

'And I choose you,' she put in, with a charming little nod.

He sat bewildered for a moment, then said stiffly, 'May I ask why?'

'If I may answer by the question, why not? Surely we need not be strangers? And besides——'

'And besides?'—he echoed grimly, 'a woman's second reason is generally better than her first.'

Lady Arbuthnot's face grew grave. 'Mine is, Mr. Raymond, infinitely better. What I want your help for is no mere personal matter; it is something in which you might do a yeoman's service to the Government——'

'You are very kind,' he interrupted brusquely; 'but, as I thought you knew, I found out twelve years ago that the Government could do very well without my services.'

'It might have done better with them——'

'You are very kind,' he repeated; 'and this difficulty of yours?'

She flushed up. 'Excuse me! It was you, not I, who wandered from the point. I knew my reasons for choosing

your help. However, let us stick to business. I have lost a jewel-case.'

'So I heard,' he said, 'and I am sorry it should have contained your pearls.'

Pearls! she thought vexedly; did he think she had come to him about the pearls? That was but a step better than Stilton cheese. His following words, however, disarmed her.

'They belonged to your mother, I remember; they were beautiful pearls!'

'Yes!' she assented softly, and paused. 'But it is not the pearls,' she went on. 'I will tell you what it is, and why I am anxious.'

He sat listening to her story with rather a bored look.

'It is most unlikely the letter will turn up,' he said at last. 'An Indian thief would throw it away, even though, as you say, it was in a sealed official envelope; he knows nothing of the value of documents. But it is a pity you kept it; for that matter, had it. That sort of thing is a mistake.'

Something in his tone made her say quickly, 'You blame father—why? You know how he trusted me—how you——' She felt inclined to remind him of his own confidence in her, but she refrained. 'Remember I have always——'

'Been in the swim,' he suggested.

'Could I help that?' she asked, feeling him unfair. 'What I mean is, that every one, even my husband——'

'I have always heard you do a great deal for Sir George,' he said nastily, regretting his unfairness even as he spoke. He need not have done so, save for his own sake, since her defence annihilated him.

'As I would have done for you, Mr. Raymond.'

'I—I beg your pardon,' he said limply, feeling himself a brute. 'This paper or letter, then, as I understand it, would have been a sort of safe-conduct to prevent the authorities rounding on Sir George after the event, as they are apt to do. As'—a thought seemed to strike him, and he looked at her sharply—'as they did on me. Your experience has been useful to you, Lady Arbuthnot!'

She flushed up again. 'How could I prevent its being so? I am not a fool. But you know quite well I do not come to you on his account. It is because I am so afraid of the contents of that unfortunate letter leaking out. With this general election going on——'

He shrugged his shoulders and rose. 'I am no politician, as I told you; but as a personal matter——'

She rose also and challenged him with eyes, voice, and manner. 'I do not choose it to be a personal matter. It is more than that; it might concern the prestige, the honour of our Government! Surely you must still care for that? You used——'

He interrupted her with a laugh. 'It would be in a parlous state if it depended on me. I don't trouble my head about patriotism nowadays, I assure you.'

She came a step nearer, as if to bar a hint he gave of leaving. 'Is that possible?' she asked, almost sternly; 'within gunshot, as we stand now, of a place where Englishmen died in hundreds to keep the hand of their race upon the plough of India.'

The lightness had no choice but to pass from his face.

'Mine left it ten years ago, Lady Arbuthnot,' he said, his voice matching hers; 'and yours, excuse me, is not the one to wile it back. But for your husband's sake—not for yours, that past is past—I will——'

She lost her temper absolutely then. 'Who thinks, who wishes it otherwise? Can you not understand my motive in coming to you?'

'Perfectly,' he said coolly. 'You feel responsible—why, God knows!—for the hash I have made of my life. I speak from your point of view, remember. Of course, nothing I can say will mitigate this feeling; it is a habit you good women have. Now I, as a man, should have thought that the palpable result of my going my own way, instead of yours, would have given you the certainty of having been right in refusing to countenance it.'

She did not speak for a second, and when she did there was a tremor in her voice. 'That doesn't lessen—the—the pity of it,' she said, half to herself; 'it *is* pitiful. Even if you had any one, wife or child——' She broke off and added apologetically, 'One can scarcely help regrets.'

Once more the man in him felt annihilated by the revelation of the woman in her. 'My—my dear, kind lady,' he said, touched in spite of himself, 'I can assure you I get along splendidly all round. You're all too kind. And as for the kids,' he added half nervously, for she looked as if she would cry, and he wished to cheer her up, 'I'm chums

with the lot of them. Jerry, for instance! What a ripping little chap he is—such a lot of go; but he isn't a bit like you.'

She stood looking at him without replying for a moment, and the half-puzzled expression which had been in her face when she had watched him and the child standing hand-in-hand at the racecourse returned to it. 'No!' she said. 'Nor like his father. He has harked back in face to my mother's people—she was a distant cousin of your father's, you remember. And in mind—who knows? But I'm glad you like him; he returns the compliment.'

It seemed so, indeed, for Jerry himself, appearing that instant, had his hand tucked into Jack Raymond's even before he delivered his message, which was to the effect that dad was wanting mum to go home. He gabbled this through, in order to say, with a military formality learned, to his great delight, from Captain Lloyd, 'Ah, sir! I'm glad it's you; 'cos it isn't weally dark, an' Miss Dwummond's weading the *Spectator*, so it's just the time for you to show me the pwoperest places in the Garden Mound, please, as you pwomised you would. I mean the places where people was blown up—or deaded somehow!'

'You bloodthirsty young ruffian!' laughed Jack Raymond, feeling relieved at the interruption. 'All right! come along! I promised to take him round and tell him about the defence, Lady Arbuthnot,' he explained; 'but perhaps you will allow me to find your carriage for you first.'

'Thanks,' she replied curtly, 'my husband will do that. Good-night, Mr. Raymond. I am sorry I was not so successful in my request as—as my son.'

He stared after her yet once more. Women were inexplicable. Here was this one quite happily married—he had known that for years—and yet she would have liked—what the deuce would she have liked? He turned half impatiently to the child, and said, 'Come along, young Briton, and be sentimental over the past! Come and contemplate the deeds of your ancestors and make believe you're a hero. That's the game!'

'But I *am* going to be one when I'm growed up, you know,' protested Jerry.

The man paused and looked down at the child. 'If you get the chance, dear little chap,' he said bitterly, 'but the

mischief is that what with express trains and telegrams, you've seldom to do more than you're told to do. And so most of the C.B.'s and V.C.'s are given for doing one's simple duty.'

'My dad's a C.B.,' commented the child sagely; 'but then he can do his compound duties too. Can you?'

'Can I?' echoed the man, and his voice belied the inevitable smile on his face. 'Well! I don't know. I expect I could, Jerry—if I tried.'

So hand-in-hand the two, boy and man, crossed the carriage-drive which lay between the club and the rising ground beyond it. Ground kept as a garden in memory of the deeds which had blossomed in its dust. For on that scarce perceptible mound, the English flag, taking advantage of every available inch to stand its highest, had floated for nine long months over the rebel town of Nushapore. Had floated securely, though the hands which held it grew fewer and weaker day by day. Had floated royally, though kings' palaces challenged it from the right, challenged it from the left.

And now, more than forty years after, the mound—set thick with blossoming trees—stretched as a peaceful lawn between those palaces still; but the one was an English club and the other Government House.

'That's the gate, Jerry,' said Jack Raymond, 'where Gunner Smith asked the mutineers—they were only three feet from the wall, you know—to oblige him with a pipe light, because he had been so long on duty that he had run short.'

Jerry laughed vaingloriously, uproariously.

'That was to cheek 'em, sir, wasn't it, sir? For, of course, *he* didn't care if he never smoked no more, so long as he kept 'em outside! Oh! isn't it just orful nice?'—here he heaved a sigh of pure delight—'and now, please, I want where boys like me did sentry, an' where the guns got wed-hot and boomed off of 'emselves, an' where every one blowed 'emselves up like in a stwawbewwy-cweam smash, becos' the enemy was cweepin', cweepin' in, don't you know?'

The child's voice ran on, eager, joyous, hopeful, and the man was conscious of a thrill that seemed to pass into his own veins from that little clasping hand.

'All in good time, Jerry! don't rush your fences,' replied Jack Raymond, and the thrill seemed to have invaded his voice.

So across the lawns, and along the winding walks bosomed in tall trees, where the birds were twittering their nightly quarrel for the uppermost roosting-place, those two, boy and man, the present and the future of the race, with its unforgotten past linking them, strolled hand-in-hand.

And the daylight lingering with the moonlight lay hand-in-hand also; lay softly, kindly, upon all things.

'This is the east battery, Jerry,' said the man in a hushed voice, to match the peace of the garden. 'Campbell—he was a relation of your mother's, by the way, and so a sort of relation of mine—never left it for five months. He is here still, if it comes to that, for he was literally blown to bits at last by a shell he was trying to throw back on the enemy. He'd done it dozens of times before, but this time—was the last!'

There was not much to see. Only a slab in the dim grass with 'East Battery' cut upon it.

'Mum told me about that,' said Jerry in an awed whisper. 'His name was Gerald, same as mine,'—he paused to look doubtfully at the face above him—'she said it was an eggsample to me. But I 'm not goin' to be blowed up first. My shells 'll always burst just in the vewy wightest places, bang in the middle of the enemy, so I can laugh at 'em before I dead.'

Jack Raymond, passing on, felt a pang. 'Always in the very rightest places!' That had been the dream of another boyhood.

The sky was as a pearl overhead; a pearl set in a darkening tracery of trees. The moon began to stretch faint fingers of shadow after the retreating day, and still those two, man and boy, passed from one immemorial deed to another, while the small hand sent its thrill to the big one, so that Jack Raymond wondered at the tremor in his voice as he said, pointing through the trees—

'And there's the general's house with the English flag flying still!'

Jerry stiffened like a young pointer on its first covey, every inch of him centred on the grey tower, its flagstaff draped dimly with the royal ensign, which rose against the sky. Then, standing square, head up, he saluted.

'Mum told me to do that always when I saw it,' he explained, 'because it 's the only place in all the wide, wide world where the flag flies day and night, to show, you know, that it never was hauled down—never—never.' He heaved another sigh of satisfaction, but his face took a puzzled expression. 'Only, you know, I've been here before. I weally have. I wemember it quite, quite well. An' the guns was booming, an' they was wanting to pull down the flag, an' I wouldn't let them.'

Jack Raymond looked down at the child and smiled. 'You, or some one of your sort, dear old chap; and I'll bet you 'd do it again, wouldn't you, Jerry?'

Jerry pulled himself together from the mysterious inheritance of the past. 'I'm goin' to, some day,' he said succinctly. 'An' now, please, I want where they buried 'em after dark. All pwoper wif surplices an' "Safe, safe home in port," and all that; but torches and crack-bang firings over the walls—though they was deaders already.'

The description, confused though it was by excess of picturesqueness, sent Jack Raymond unerringly towards the little cemetery where so many heroes rest. But ere they reached the gate, a woman's figure showed upon a side-path.

'There 's Miss Drummond; you 'll have to go home now, young man,' remarked Jack Raymond, feeling that though Jerry's enthusiasm did not bore him, Lesley's might. But Jerry would have no excuse.

'Oh!' he said confidentially, '*she* is only a woman. You tell her to come, and she 'll come all wight.'

Jack Raymond looked towards the springy step and determined pose of the head which was approaching him with alarm; but Jerry had already run forward, slipped his hand into the girl's, and said—

'He says you 're to come too, because he is going to tell us all about the gwaves.'

'Not all,' protested Jack Raymond resignedly; 'but if Miss Drummond can spare us a minute, I'll show you John Ellison's.'

The girl's face lit up. 'Isn't that about all?' she asked quickly. 'The very name seems to dominate the place still. *Jân-Ali-shân!* That 's what the natives call him, your father says, Jerry. It means the "Spirit of Kings." A good

name, isn't it, for the man who held this garden against all comers, even starvation?'

Her head was up, her voice rang; but the thrill did not pass to the man's heart from these as it had from the clasp of that little hand, which some day would have a man's grip.

'There was a heap of bunkum talked, though, about the actual physical privations of the mutiny time; they had iced soda and Moselle cup on the ridge at Delhi, you know, Miss Drummond,' he said, out of pure contrariety.

'I should like to be sure of that,' she began indignantly.

'I should like to be sure of a lot of mutiny tales,' he interrupted; 'but there's a halo of romance on our side and a shadow of fear on theirs, which plays the deuce with abstract truth. I wish we could forget the whole business.'

'Forget! Forget our glorious past!'

'Was it so glorious? I asked Budlu once'—he pointed to a white ghostlike figure which had begun to follow them from the cemetery gate—'how a mere handful of us here kept their thousands at bay. Budlu is supposed to have been inside, during the siege, as a child's bearer—that's why they made him caretaker; but I've reason to believe he was outside—not that it matters now! Well, his answer was: "The *sahibs* had nothing to do with it. It was the dead women and the dead babies. Every one knows that the strength of the strongest man is water before the ghost of a mother and child."'

They had reached the slope of that gentle hollow where, even in their bitterest stress, the living had crept obstinately, under cover of night, to lay their dead to rest in the shadow of the deserted church, and he paused to point downwards to a tall cypress and add, 'There is John Ellison's grave.'

Lesley paused too. Calm and still in the moonlight, the grassy slopes, set with flowers and blossoming shrubs, seemed to centre on that hollow of heroes' graves, as they, in their turn, centred round the plain plinth, with its marble slab under the cypress tree.

There were but two words on it—'John Ellison'—but they filled the eye, the heart, the brain.

Lesley Drummond stood looking at them silently, and Jack Raymond stood watching her, approving her silence. But Jerry, whose round childish face had a curious ghostly look on it, as if he were seeing visions, went creeping on round

the plinth, his grey eyes wide; a stealthy little figure dreaming of torches and deaders and crack-bang firings over walls. But he was back in a second, his face eager, startled.

'Oh, if you please—he's quite, quite shot—lyin' there close by. Hadn't we better buwy him?'

'Bury him? who?' asked Lesley; but Jack Raymond had grasped the child's meaning, and was passing to the other side of the plinth to see for himself. Then he looked up from the figure of a man which lay on its back, its head supported on the first step of the plinth, asked a question of Budlu the caretaker in Hindustani, and finally turned reassuringly to Lesley.

'It is only an idle sweep of a loafer, Miss Drummond, who has rather a queer story. Stay! I'll wake him—Budlu reports him sober—and he will tell the story himself, I've no doubt.' As he spoke, a vigorous shake roused the sleeper to an oath, then to a stare, finally to a bland smile as he rose.

'Bin overtook by slumber, sir,' said a rich, mellow voice as (possibly in evasion of more salient faults in his personality) the owner of it began to brush away the dust and dry twigs which clung to his dirty drill-clothing. 'The w'ich we all of us shall be w'en our time comes to lie within the silent toomb—b.' He prolonged the final syllable into a reminiscent humming of a funeral hymn until his task was done. Then he looked up, and showed in the moonlight the face of a man about forty, smooth shaven, of the bulldog type, with the mobile lips of a born comedian.

'I done my level best with the job you giv' me down country, sir,' he continued affably, yet with a furtive apology lurking beneath his assurance, 'but it done no sort of dooty by me. I gone down two stone in a six weeks with them pestilential chills, so w'ot with plague follerin' famine like the prayer-book, sir, I made bold to cut back to Nushapore. I 'adn't a grave bespoke there, sir, as I 'ave here; an' so I didn't want no

"Death's bright Angel speakin' in a chord a—ga—ain."'

Once more that prolongation of the final syllable was followed by an appropriate tune.

'If you don't mend your ways, my man,' said Jack Raymond severely, 'you'll have no grave bespoke here either. The authorities won't allow——'

'Can't 'elp 'emselves, sir,' interrupted the loafer, touching the battered billycock hat which he had resumed after a careful dusting. 'It 's the Queen's regulations, sir, that them as went through the siege may wait for the las' trump in an 'ero's grave beside *'is*, if they choose. An', Lord love you! I do choose, for they chris'en me in token I shouldn't fear the very day *'e* died.' He laid his hand on the slab.

'That was why they called you John Ellison, wasn't it?' asked Jack Raymond, with a side-look at Lesley, which the loafer appraised, for he replied coolly—

'Yes, m'lady! Mr. Raymon', 'e know the story correc'! My father died o' the drink a few days afore we come into the Garding Mound, an' my mother—savin' your presence, m'lady, she didn't 'ave bin to church with 'im through 'er real 'usband 'aving deserted 'er or died, cruel uncertain—she popped off a few days after I, so to speak, popped in. That was nigh on a nine-months' sequent. So I was through the siege, m'lady, from the beginnin', an' 'avin' no one to promise an' vow when they Holy baptismed me the day *'e* died, they called me John Ellison. And an uncommon good name it is, m'lady, though I 've took it to a sight o' queer places since; for I seen a deal o' life at 'ome an' abroad, as the sayin' is. Bin in a surplus chore singin' 'ymns seven year, m'lady; an' pickin' up sticks for a Aunt Sally two. Then I served my way out to see

"—the place where I was born"'—

he paused for a faint humming—'an' Mr. Raymon', good gentleman, 'e 'ave put me in to a many jobs, but only local demons; they ain't some'ow bin no sort of permanent. An'

"So the world goes round and round
Until our life with sleep is crowned—d—d."

He was fairly afloat this time with his rich mellow voice, when Jack Raymond bid him shut up and not play the fool. Why couldn't he stick to work when it was given him?

The jauntiness disappeared in a curiously dignified dejection. 'By the Lord 'oo made me, sir,' he said contritely, 'I dun'no. I begins well; then—I—I don't! I git on the lap foolin' round them bazaars, until I 'aven't a feather ter fly with. Then *'e* begin to dror me to 'im—m.' He paused

again to indicate the slab, and the final syllable merged into the whole first line of 'They grew in beauty side by side.' 'Beg parding, sir,' he went on, anticipating reproof, 'but the warblin' fetches me 'ome so often, wot with penny gaffs an' such like, that it gits a continooal hold on me too frequent.'

'You 'll lay hold of nothing else soon,' retorted Jack Raymond. 'You 're out of work now, I suppose?'

'Jes' so, sir; ready for active service.'

'And I've a great mind to let you find it for yourself. However, you're in the Strangers' Home, I suppose, as usual?'

'As usooal, sir!' came the cheerful reply, and as they passed on, the mellow rich tenor followed them in a florid rendering of 'Home, sweet Home.' It echoed through the hollow of heroes, over the grave-set slope where the descendants of those who held the fort are allowed burial, and so passed with the little party to the gate. Here Budlu, who had followed all the time, ghostlike, silent, made some petition in Urdu, to which Jack Raymond replied with a smile.

'He said something about "*Jân-Ali-shân*," didn't he?' asked Lesley. 'You must excuse the curiosity, but I am naturally anxious to learn everything about India.'

'A most laudable ambition, I'm sure,' he replied drily. 'Budlu only wanted to know, Miss Drummond, if *Jân-Ali-shân* was going back to his grave to-night; for if not, it would be better to leave the cemetery gate open—he usually locks it at sundown.'

'*Jân-Ali-shân!*' she echoed aghast. 'He can't call that wretched creature—he can't think——'

Jack Raymond interrupted her. 'I don't know very much about the possibilities or impossibilities of India, though I've lived in it for twenty years; but I do happen to know that half Nushapore has a sneaking idea that the wretched creature is, well, a sort of emanation of the great John Ellison. He has the same strain, you see, of sheer devilry, pluck, ability, call it what you will—the something that makes its mark on Eastern people. And they think he comes for revenge, because, as you heard him say, he is in such a mortal funk of being cheated out of "an 'ero's grave" if he dies away from Nushapore, that he always comes back when there's trouble about. The natives are

quick to notice such things. Well, he may have his tens of thousands this year.'

'You mean that the plague will come?'

'And a row, too, if we aren't careful.'

Jerry's hand tightened on Jack Raymond's. 'A weal wow, sir, with sieges and everything?'

'Sieges? Well, I don't know. What do you want sieges for, young man?'

The child's face showed confident. 'Because I want an 'ero's grave of my vewy own, like what that man's got. An' it wouldn't be dog-in-the-mangery, like two pieces of cake, Miss Dwummond, 'cos I could lend it to other people till I weally did want it; but if it was my vewy own, you see'—he hesitated, then a sudden comprehension seemed to come to him—'then I could fight all the vewy biggest big boys wifout caring. For I could pop into my gwave an' laugh at 'em, even if I was licked—'cos—'cos I should have won weally—shouldn't I, sir?'

The moon shone clear on the ruins before them, and all around them, hidden in the shadows of the trees, lay the little world which forty years before had defied a big one. Through the still silence came only that twittering of birds fighting for a roosting-place, until the man's voice said evenly—

'It is a question, Jerry, "*how far high failure overleaps the bound of low successes.*" Ask Miss Drummond; I don't know.'

The answering woman's voice came swiftly. 'Surely this is no place for an Englishman to talk of failure!'

He turned sharply. So this girl was at it now; she too wanted to rouse him; she had heard the story—or part of it.

'I almost wish it were,' he answered bitterly; 'then we might forget it. But the glory of it gets to our heads—we come back to it again and again.'

He stopped abruptly, for a tenor voice rose in sweet undertones upon that twittering of birds—

> 'There is a green hill far away,
> Outside a city wall.'

The singing and the faint crush of gravel ceased together, as the singer, passing them, drew up and touched the old billycock hat.

'Beg parding, sir,' said John Ellison, loafer, 'but p'r'aps you'd care to 'ear there was a man dead o' plague taken out o' the train I come in this mornin'.'

'Thanks,' replied Jack Raymond. 'I know there have been several isolated cases.'

'Jes' so, sir; not as there's so much isolation, not to speak of, in them third-class cattle-pens,' assented the mellow voice; and as the footstep passed on, it kept time to the refrain of

'Wait for the wagon, and we'll all take a ride.'

'I expect we shall,' remarked Jack Raymond grimly, and his mind reverted to Grace Arbuthnot and her husband. There might be need for that safe-conduct ere long. Well, they must manage things as best they could; he wouldn't.

'Oh! I do hope there'll be a wow, a weal wow!' came Jerry's prayerful voice.

CHAPTER V

SHARK LANE

THERE was no quainter spot in all Nushapore than Shark Lane (as the road near the public offices where the lawyers congregated was generally called), though at first sight it seemed to differ little from its neighbours. Broad, white, its tree-set margins were studded with the usual inconsequent-looking stucco gate-posts of an Indian station, which, guiltless of any fence, serve to mark the short carriage-drives leading back to the houses.

And these again—colour-washed pink, yellow, or blue—were even as other houses of the second-class. Yet it did not need the placards on those same gate-posts, announcing that 'Mr. Lala Râm Nâth' or 'Mr. Syyed Abdul Rahmân,' 'barristers-at-law,' lived within, to tell the passer-by that the inhabitants were not European.

To begin with, somewhere or another, there was almost sure to be a grass hurdle visible—the grass hurdle which in India does the duty of a hoarding and ensures privacy. Indeed, a knowledgable eye could infer the exact degree to which the social life within was at variance with the Western architecture in which it dwelt by the number and position of such hurdles. Two or three, merely blocking in an arch of verandah, being indicative of a lingering dislike to publicity in some 'new woman'; a dozen or more, screening in a patch of garden ground, showing the rigorous seclusion of the old.

True, in not a few cases, this sign was absent, but then a nameless air of utter desolation, a blank stare out on the world, told its tale of a keener quarrel still—of family ties, family life, lost absolutely in the chase after Western ways, Western ideas. In such houses the only sign of life from dawn to dusk, barring a furtive wielder of a grass broom

raising clouds of dust at stated intervals, would be the rickety hired carriage, like a green box on wheels, which, every morning and every evening, would turn out and in between those inconsequent gate-posts, conveying a solitary young man and a pile of law-books to and from the courts.

Such a very solitary-looking young man, that the question sprang inevitably to the spectator's lips, 'Is the game worth the candle?'

There were others, besides spectators, in Shark Lane who asked the question, and were not sure of the answer. Miriam-bibi, Hâfiz Ahmad's wife, for instance, who, as Aunt Khôjee put it, had been taken away to live as a *mem*, felt it was not. Of course it was dignified to eat in one room, sit in another, and sleep in a third, as if this trinity of habit were Heaven's decree. Then, undoubtedly, small bronze feet did look entrancing in small bronze high-heeled shoes. But when there *could* be no novel-reading, no writing of notes, no arranging of flowers and playing of the piano, and when you were accustomed to eat and sleep when the fancy took you? Then one room was quite sufficient in which to be dull and solitary, since there were no friends or relations near to come in for a gossip.

Besides, it was undeniable that the pretty bronze shoes pinched the toes that were accustomed to greater freedom.

Therefore it was a joy, indeed, when, on Sundays, the green box on wheels, instead of taking Hâfiz Ahmad to court, took her back to the close, familiar city; to the evil-smelling bazaars below, and the scented, sensual woman's life above, so full of laughter and quarrelling, so full of sunshine and seclusion, with its unending suggestion of sex.

Full also, to Miriam's intense delight, of betel-chewing and tobacco-smoking; for though Hâfiz Ahmad permitted neither in Shark Lane, he never noticed the resultant signs of either on her return. So proving himself possessed of that master's degree in the art of compromise which young India has to take before attempting even a bachelor's in any other.

For even Miriam found single-mindedness impossible in Shark Lane, and her eulogiums on her new life had to be so strenuous in the city that even simple Aunt Khôjee remarked that '*wise hens never cackled over their own nests unless they were empty!*'

On Monday mornings too, after her debauch in city ways, Miriam found it necessary to be aggressively European. She would even go so far as to eat the lightly-boiled egg of civilisation for her breakfast—the egg which calls for salt-cellars and spoons, in other words for refinement and luxury. And when her husband had departed in the green box with his law-books, she would yawn dutifully in all three rooms, till nature could no more. So she would send surreptitiously for the cook's wife and baby, and adjourn to a hurdle-closed verandah where her visitors could be properly screened from the new world. Since, let the master do as he chose, there would have been noses on the green in the servant's house had its womenkind allowed the tips of theirs to be seen by strangers!

So Miriam would be comparatively content till the advent of the green box sent her back to three rooms, and a pair of bronze slippers.

On the whole, this double life of hers was a very fair example of most lives in Shark Lane where, despite all the high aspirations after truth and reality, it was quite impossible to reach either; since every one was quite aware that they were trying an experiment, and that a doubtful one.

This was the case more especially in the last house in Shark Lane, just where it merged into the more fashionable River Road. Here, at the corner, a very decorative pair of posts announcing that Mr. Chris Davenant lived within, stood cheek by jowl beside a similar pair with Mr. Lucanaster's name upon them; and though one of the two houses was screened, it was screened by trellises and creepers, behind which a pale pink dress could often be seen fluttering in company with the owner of the other house. For Mrs. Chris Davenant claimed her full share of Western liberty.

So large a share, indeed, that one morning a few days after the races, Krishn Davenund, as Shark Lane persisted in calling him, sate looking hopelessly at his untouched breakfast; in this case also that lightly-boiled egg of civilisation. It stood in a correct silver egg-stand beside a charming arrangement of ferns and flowers; for Miss Genevieve Fuller, now Mrs. Chris, had been that curious product of latter-day London, a vulgar girl of good taste. As she had walked along the streets, her fringe delicately wanton beneath the white veil whose black spots were never permitted to rest in unbecoming places,

her cold blue eyes had settled unerringly on all the daintiest creations in the shop windows. And she would pause before a hand-painted *sortie de bal* or a belaced silk undergarment, and say with equal frankness to her companion, male or female, 'My! that would give poor little me a chance, wouldn't it?'

Even some of the third-rate young men from the city, over whom she had wielded a cheap empire at her mother's boarding-house down the Hammersmith Road, had found such remarks reminiscent of the princess from whose pretty lips toads fell instead of pearls, but Krishn Davenund, student at the Middle Temple, did not know his Mother Goose. Having an all too intimate acquaintance with the poets, however, the superficial refinement of the girl, seen against the background of the only English life he knew, had made him think of the Lady in Comus; for he could have no standard save that of books.

She looked dainty enough for any heroine's part even now, after eighteen months' disillusionment, as she stood before him, in a paucity of pink muslin negligé (which had mostly run to frills) and a plenitude of powder. She had an open note in one hand, a half-smoked Turkish cigarette—of Mr. Lucan-aster's importing—in the other, and a rather bored good-nature on her face as she looked at the man she had married because her good taste had told her the truth, namely, that he was better-looking and better-bred than any of her other admirers.

It had been a hideous mistake, of course; but she was shrewd enough to see that the shock of finding, on his return to India, that there was literally no place for him in it had been quite as painful to her husband as to herself. So she exonerated him of blame, with a sort of contemptuous pity and an absolute lack of sympathy. It was nothing to her, for instance, that, apart from the temporal loss of finding himself only the son of a Hindoo widow who had reverted to the most bigoted austerity on her husband's death, instead of the son of a man high up in Government service, whose position had made unorthodoxy tolerable to relations and friends alike, he should have come back to find a change in himself, to feel a wild revolt against the renewed contact with things which he had, literally, left behind him five years before. The things themselves were too hopelessly, incredibly trivial and childish for her to do anything but laugh at them, so

he had soon ceased even to mention them; though they meant far more to him.

Despite the mission school training which is the foundation-culture of nearly all young India, his religion was a mere ethical sense, an emotional yielding to the attraction of everything to which the epithet 'Higher' could be applied—mathematics and morals alike. And the giving-in to the disgusting rites necessary before he could re-enter native society on equal terms with those, even, who were of lower caste than himself, had seemed to him degrading. So, despite his mother's prayers and the advice of other men who, in like position, had purchased comfort by acquiescence, he had refused to be made clean on the offered terms. With this result, that the only familiar touch left to him was that which this woman in the *demi-mondaine* pink negligé laid on his shoulder as, after a time, she flung the note down on the table, and with a tolerant laugh paused beside him on her way from the room.

'Don't be a fool, Chris!' she said cheerfully. 'You can't be expected to understand, of course, so I'm not really angry. It is all right, old man. Heaps of English women do that sort of thing; and I'm going to, anyhow, so it's no good fussing.'

He made no reply. He seemed, even to himself, to have nothing to say; nothing that could be said, at any rate, since the fierce claim for silence and submission (even if it entailed the disposal of a corpse!) which he had inherited from his fathers, had to be smothered. So he only stared at the note, which lay face uppermost. It began 'Dearest Jenny'; and *he* called his wife Viva!

The difference of style epitomised the situation, since she preferred the Jenny; it reminded her of bank clerks and the top of the Hammersmith omnibus. He realised this now, for he was no fool; only a reader of books, a believer in theories, a dreamer of dreams, who, in the almost brutal blaze of an Indian sun, had awakened, not to realities—that was impossible to one who still had no guide save books—but to a new attempt at dreams. One which made him say pompously, after the fashion in novels, 'I do not wish it, Viva; and you will please to remember that I am your husband.'

His English, barring a faintly foreign intonation, was perfect; but his wife laughed.

'Don't, Chris! It doesn't suit the part. Besides, we were only married at the registrar's. So if you want a wife of that sort, Lucanaster says you can marry one, if I don't object. I've been thinking about it, and I don't think I should——'

He stood up and threw his hands out passionately ere covering his face with them; and the action, utterly un-English as it was, suited him better than his previous calm.

'It—it's a lie to begin with,' he cried hoarsely. 'And even if it weren't—I won't have it said—it—it makes me lose myself.'

She drew back a bit and looked at him. 'You've done that already, Chris, and so've I,' she said calmly. 'Now don't interrupt, please; I've been fizzling for this talk the last month, for we shall rub along together so much better when we thoroughly understand each other. So, I'm not going to pretend any more, Chris! It doesn't work. I tried it at first because—well! because you mean well, and I like to make things comfy while I can. But I'm sick of Shark Lane. Some of the men wouldn't be bad, if they weren't so awfully high-toned—that's what's the matter with you, Chris! —but the women beat me. I went to see that little fool Hâfiz Ahmad's wife yesterday, because I'm a good-natured fool myself and she said she was dull, and you asked me; and as I say, I like things comfy. Well! she wanted me to play old maid, and the cards were—oh! filthy! That finished me. Of course it was only a trifle, but it did the trick. I've chucked. I won't play the game any more, Chris. I am going my own way; and if you want to see Shark Lane here, I shall be somewhere else. You needn't bother or fuss. I can take care of myself perfectly—I went about London a lot, you know. Besides, doesn't it stand to reason that I'm a better judge of what an English lady can do than you are? Why! I might as well try and teach you the etiquette of those disgusting temples where your precious stay-at-home women worship in—in the *altogether*!' She giggled modestly, and then, seeing his face, gave him a final pat. 'Cheer up, Chris! I'm sure you could marry one—a cousin or something—if you tried.'

He interrupted her with a listless, nerveless dignity. 'You seem to think it all pretence, but I couldn't go back to the old ways; this—this has meant more to me, than

that——' his lips quivered as if with coming tears, he had to pull himself together visibly. 'For the rest,' he went on drearily, 'I am not quite so ignorant as you deem me. One reads of—of this sort of situation, and I can shape my course as other men have shaped theirs; only—only do not try my patience too far.'

He meant the last in all seriousness, but neither the thought nor the words were his own; and the pathos of this despairing clutch on book-knowledge being, of course, lost on her commonplace vulgarity, she laughed once more.

'Why, Chris! you've got that as pat as pat! quite the injured hub in domestic drama. Goody me! to think I might be going down still on the top of the dear old red 'bus to the mouth of the pit on a first night! Well, that's over, so we must just both be as chirpy as we can. Good-bye, Chris! I've got to dress, for Lucanaster's coming for me in half an hour. And don't expect me till you see me. They did talk of tents out, a dance, and a regular night of it. You really needn't fuss, Chris; you *can't* understand, you see.'

When she had gone, he sate staring helplessly at the boiled egg, as if he expected something to hatch out of it. Even thought forsook him, for the first to come was that this woman was his wife. Wife! the word conjured up such a different idea in the hereditary experience which inevitably underlay all things in him, that he could go no further in bewilderment.

So, in the effort to escape from the thraldom of the old wisdom, which such as he have to make so often, he took up the newspaper which lay beside him, telling himself passionately that the old order had changed, that life held more than his fathers had dreamt of. Yet even as he told himself this, the burden of doubt which such as he have to bear came upon him, a sense of unreality, even in himself, closed round him.

Unreal! Unreal! Unreal!

The word typed itself on the columns of the *Voice of India* as he read them. The paper was the recognised organ of his class, the exponent of its desires, its beliefs. Yet here even that word pursued him. Here on the first page was a leader stigmatising the temporary withdrawal of independent powers from the Municipal Committee as an unwarrantable piece of tyranny. Unwarrantable! Was it possible

for any sane man to call it so, knowing, as all knew, the grievous tale of neglect and wrongdoing in that Committee? Was it possible, even apart from that, for any wise man not to see that with plague clamouring for an entrance, the good of the many claimed a more energetic sanitary reform than the Committee seemed able or willing to introduce?

And as for the hints thrown out that the newly-published plague regulations were but a sop, a blind, hiding a very different policy; what then? Was it possible for any government to do more than legislate for the *present*? Who but fools imagined that it could or would bind itself to definite action in conditions which could only be guessed at?

So the tale of unreality went on. Here was a well-written, well-reasoned article on the cow-killing grievance; but Chris, being a wielder of the pen himself, happened to know the writer, and could remember seeing him eating beef-steaks at the Temple dinners.

Again, in a paragraph headed 'Government Greed and Peasant Poverty.' Could any detail overcome the indubitable fact that India had the cheapest civilised government in the world?

He ran his eye down another column, and caught the phrase 'social progress' above a signature which he knew to be that of a man who had just married a child of ten.

And what was this? '*The Government to which is opposed the entire intelligence of the nation!*' Brave words these, when the proportion between such intelligence and the general ignorance was withheld! What was it? Ten thousand to one!

'*The political training of the mass of the people is still, it is true, somewhat incomplete.*' It might well be that when the percentage of mere literates was almost negligible.

'*Even the Mohammedan policy was better than the English one. True, it did not allow freedom of the press. . . .*'

Ye gods! Freedom of the press when there was not a newspaper in all the length and breadth of the land! Could unreality, bunkum, call it what you will, go further than that?

Chris pushed himself back from the table, back from the boiled egg, back from the newspaper, back, so far as he could, from himself, with an odd sound between a laugh, a sob, and a curse.

Was that all? Was that sort of ungenerous, unreliable, almost unimaginable drivel the only indictment which such as he had to bring against those who had depolarised life? Who had neither given India a creed, nor taken one away? Was that the only arraignment for the tyranny of pain such as his?

No! a thousand times no! There was more to be said than that!

So to him came the fatal facility for words which is the betrayal of his race. He sate down to write, and, heedless of the sound of dogcart wheels and a man's and a woman's laughter which came after a time, did not rise until he stood up with sheets on sheets of scarce-dried manuscript in his hand, feeling for the first time in his intellectual life that he was alone. Hitherto he had always followed the thoughts of the great masters. Hitherto there had always been some one on the road before him. Now the question, a burning one to his enthusiasm, was—'Would any one come after him?'

Hâfiz Ahmad's house, the rallying-point of young India in Nushapore, lay close by. It was a court-holiday, and therefore the chances were great that some meeting or another was being held; since meetings are a recognised holiday amusement with those who, amid all the unreality of their lives, are still terribly in earnest.

He would go there and seek an audience.

On his way out, however, he saw Jack Raymond riding up the drive. Jack Raymond, one of the few Englishmen he could count on to be kind, yet who, despite that, had never called on his wife. Was he going to do so now? As a matter of fact, Jack Raymond had had no such intention; he had come over to ask Chris himself about a post which was vacant, and which might keep John Ellison, loafer, out of more mischief; but seeing Chris coming towards him with a pleased expectant look on his somewhat pathetic face, a half-irritated pity made him ask if Mrs. Davenant was at home.

'I 'm sorry she has gone out with Lucanaster,' he repeated, unaware of the emphasis he laid on the qualification till he saw poor Chris flinch, when he said hurriedly, 'but I 'll come in if I may. I've a question or two I want to ask.'

Whereupon Chris, who, despite his five years of England

and his wife's incessant instructions, had never been able to grasp that exclusive use of certain rooms to certain uses, took Jack Raymond straight into the dining-room, where, amongst the litter of an unfinished breakfast, a note, on which quite inadvertently the visitor set his riding-whip, lay face uppermost.

That 'Dearest Jenny,' therefore, stared Jack Raymond in the face all the time he was settling that John Ellison should go for a week's trial as foreman on the new goods station which Chris was building. He knew the writing, and had, what poor Chris had not, a fixed standard of inherited and acquired experience by which to judge the writer. And so a curious mixture of pity and repugnance came to the Englishman as he looked at the face opposite him—the gentle face so full of intelligence, so devoid of character—and thought of that other coarser, commoner one. It was a question of the two men only; the woman, dismissed briefly as a bad sort, counted for nothing in Jack Raymond's mind.

Yet if Lucanaster had been an Englishman, it is ten to one that Jack Raymond would not have said abruptly, as he did say when he rose to take up his riding-whip, 'If I were you, Davenant, I wouldn't let my wife be seen with that man Lucanaster. Of course you can't be expected to—to know—but he's an awful sweep!' As he spoke, his knowledge of himself made him clutch his whip tightly; but Chris only stood silent for a moment with a wild appeal in his soft eyes. Then he tried to speak; finally he sate down again, and buried his face in his hands.

The straining of the long brown fingers, tense in their effort to keep back tears, the long-drawn breath trying to keep back sobs, made Jack Raymond's pity fly before impatient contempt.

'I'm sorry. It's evidently worse than I thought,' he said; 'but that sort of thing isn't a bit of good, Davenant. Put your foot down. Say you won't have it.'

Chris Davenant's face came up from his hands with the dignity of absolute despair. 'How can I? Didn't even *you* say just now I couldn't be expected to understand? She says it too. And I've no answer. How can I have one when there is no place for me—or for her? That is it. If she had friends—if there was any one to care—any one even to be angry; but there is no one.'

His head went into his hands again, and the pity born of clearer comprehension came back to the Englishman, like the dove of old, with widespread white wings. And like the dove of old, it brought a suggestion of calmer days to come with it.

'I hadn't thought of it that way,' he said slowly; 'but I see your point. A lead over keeps many a horse between the flags. And I'll get one for your wife if I can. Lady Arbuthnot is an old friend of mine,'—he was faintly surprised at himself for this remark, which came quite naturally —'and I'm sure she will send an invitation to the Government House garden-party. Then there's the fête and the Service ball. It may seem a queer cure to you——'

'Everything is queer,' admitted Chris, trying to be cheerful. 'But I know she felt not being asked—I remember her saying——' He broke off; for the remark had been, briefly, that it was no use considering the proprieties if the proprieties didn't consider you.

'Well! that's settled. She'll find the invitations when she comes back; then there'll be the dresses, you know, and all that.'

Chris shook his head. 'I am not sure if I do. It is all new. But it is more than kind of you. If I could do anything for you in return——'

The unreserved gratitude in his face was sufficiently womanish not to rouse the English distaste to all expression of emotion, though, even so, Jack Raymond put it aside jestingly.

'Thank Lady Arbuthnot, my dear fellow; she'—he paused, a remembrance coming to him—'By the way—you're in, I know, with all the *Voice of India* scribblers—write for it yourself, don't you? Well, what is the meaning of those hints about the plague policy? What have they got hold of? anything definite?'

'So far as I know, nothing,' began Chris. 'It is, I fear, a regrettable fact that there is seldom good foundation——'

Jack Raymond, reins in hand, swung himself into his saddle lightly. 'Yes, thank God! Well! if you should hear of anything, or if you should have a chance of—say, burking anything likely to upset the apple-cart—the times are a trifle ticklish in the city—take your gratitude to me, or rather to Lady Arbuthnot, out in that.'

Chris flushed up. 'Surely,' he began volubly, 'it is the

bounden duty, as I have just been writing, of the educated portion of the community to leave themselves free for reasonable criticism by supporting Government, wherever possible, by throwing heart and soul——' The Englishman, holding his impatient mount in a grip of iron, looked down with a bored expression.

'No doubt—no doubt; but the body fills a gap better on the whole. Good-bye. I'll see to the invites, and you can drop me a line if you hear anything definite.'

CHAPTER VI

THE MONEY OF FOOLS

'FINALLY, sirs,' came a high straining voice as Chris Davenant entered Hâfiz Ahmad's house, 'the educated youngster of India refuses to let his soaring aspirations remain cribbed, cabined, confined, in the cruel shackles of a political despotism without parallel in the whole history of civilisation!'

The peroration, though it seemed to afford the speaker much satisfaction, only induced that faint desultory clapping which in England is reserved for prize-days at school; that impersonal applause for the results of diligence which remembers that other pupils have yet to speak.

This was the case here, and Chris had barely wedged himself into a chair between a writing-table and a waste-paper basket before another orator was in full swing of adjective.

The row of bicycles in the verandah, and a knot of those green-box hired carriages outside on the road, had told Chris already that he had been right in calculating on an assemblage of young India; but this was a larger gathering than he had expected, and he remembered suddenly with a vague shame—since he was a prominent member of the organisation—that it must be the monthly meeting of the Society for Promoting the General Good of People. He had quite forgotten all about it; still here he was, and here was his audience for that roll of manuscript he held.

He glanced round the double room,—for both dining and drawing-room had been thrown open, rather to Miriam-bibi's relief, since she could now sit unreservedly in the screened verandah and play 'beggar my neighbour' with her foster-mother, who did duty as ayah—and recognised almost every one of note in young Nushapore.

Hâfiz Ahmad was in the chair, of course; a rather fat young man of the coarser Mohammedan type, with a short curly beard.

Like many others in the room, he wore a scarlet fez; though why this distinctive bit of a Turk's costume should be grafted on a *quasi*-English *quasi*-Indian one is a mystery not to be beaten in incomprehensibility by any other minor problem of our Indian Empire.

Beside him was Lala Râm Nâth, the head, in Nushapore, of the only real political organisation in India; that is the Arya Somaj; an organisation all the more dangerously political because it denies the basis of politics, and appeals to that of religion.

He, Chris knew, would be the last to admit the position taken up in the roll of manuscript, namely, that it was suicidal on the part of the little leaven of educated natives to pose as the party of opposition, since that was, briefly, to array itself permanently, inevitably, against what none could deny was the party of progress; the party which had made this little leaven itself a possibility.

Râm Nâth, the breath of whose nostrils was adverse criticism to Government, who, in bewildering defiance of the laws which govern Indian life, had swallowed red-hot Radicalism wholesale, like a juggler swallowing a red-hot poker, was not likely to admit this at any time; still less now, when he was the champion of a wrongfully dispossessed Municipal Committee. Chris knew exactly what the Lala would say, and what the majority of the young men—there was not one over thirty-five in the room—would say also. And yet their faces were brimful of intelligence, of a certain eager earnestness. It could hardly be otherwise, since the mere fact of their being in that room proved them to be of those whose faculty and desire for acquiring knowledge was so far superior to that of the average man, that it had taken them, as it were, to a place apart. To be tempted of the devil perhaps; though, none the less, the fact bore witness to a certain nobility of type.

So it was all the more strange that when—the next speaker having finished in a calculated chaos of words—Govind, the dissipated editor, who had yawned his tacit approval of Dilarâm the dancer, rose to denounce some trivial iniquity in the ruling race, his middle-school English, and cheap abuse, was received with just the same desultory applause. It seemed to Chris, listening impatiently, as if the faculty of

criticism had been lost in its abuse, as if the one thing needful was antagonism *pur et simple.*

The great event of all such meetings in Nushapore followed next—a paper by Râm Nâth. He spoke admirably, and if he wandered occasionally from the point, the vast scope of his subject, 'The Political, National, and Social aspect of Modern India,' must be held responsible for that!

An Englishman listening would, of course, have challenged his facts and denied his conclusions; but Chris did neither. He gave an unqualified assent to many and many a point. And yet when he listened to the assertion that 'the cup of our political evils is so full, the burden of our social inequalities so intolerable, and the tyranny of custom stands out so red and foul, that some militant uprising has become essential to national salvation, and armed resistance the only hope of amendment,' he wondered with a certain shame how many of the millions of India would find a personal grievance in social equality or political evil. And as for the tyranny of custom? What militant uprising was possible among willing slaves?

For all that he listened, not without an answering heart-beat, to the Lala's eloquence, as he skilfully fanned every burning question with a wind of words, and let the fretting fingers of subtle suggestion undermine the foundations of fact. He was specially bitter against the plague precautions, and his hints that there was more behind them than met the eye, aroused the only spontaneous applause of the evening. Yet once more, when the well-reasoned, admirably-delivered address was over, the audience listened with exactly the same receptive expression to the recitation, by its author, of a hymn for use in the approaching Congress in which delegates were told they should—

> 'To croaking fools their folly leave,
> Their canting puerile rant;
> To noble mission steadfast cleave
> And sprouts devoutly plant.'

It was a very long hymn, and it alluded, amongst other items, to the 'blazing sun of Western lore,' to 'duty's trumpet call,' to 'England, dear home of every virtue, sweet nurse to Liberty,' and to 'India's crying woes.'

It secured a rather more hearty meed of applause than

anything else, possibly because the audience—being above all things scholastic—appreciated the difficulty of making English verse!

So, with a resolution that the 'Good of People' must be encouraged at all costs, and a vote of thanks to Mr. Râm Nâth, the actual business of the meeting ended, but not the speechifying. Half a dozen minor men stood up with a surcharged look; but one, a tall young fellow with a charmingly gentle, emotional face, caught the chairman's eye first. He was a schoolmaster, and at his own expense brought out a monthly magazine which was, briefly, the most high-toned bit of printing that ever passed through a press. Bishops might have read it and confessed themselves edified.

'Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen,' he began, 'although formal recognition of our distinguished townsman's magnificent elocutionary effort has not been wanting, I wish to record my humble admiration, and to state my belief that his forecast of possible difficulties regarding plague precautions may amount to prophecy. Since, alas! our poor folk have been strangers to beneficent sanitations from birth, and are now, as another honourable speaker pointed out, in considerable states of ebullition. Yet, instead of applying salutary balms to these uneducated minds, I grieve to say that efforts are being made to increase terror; witness the golden paper falling from Heaven, as bolt from the blue, in the so-called Temple of Viseshwar. This trick of greedy Brahmins——'

Râm Nâth was on his feet in an instant, recognised champion of his faith.

'I beg to submit, Mr. Chairman, that these words are out of order. This society is pledged to neutrality, and "trick of greedy Brahmins" is calculated to wound pious feelings.'

'I second the protest,' put in another eager voice, 'and beg the objectionable phrase be withdrawn.'

A murmur of approval ran through the larger part of the audience, and Hâfiz Ahmad, with the scowl of the true idol-hater on his face, asked the speaker to withdraw the words; which he did, protesting that, as a member of the Brahmo Somaj, he had only spoken with a view to eternal and abstract truth. The paper, he continued, though possibly only the outcome of the quarrel which, his hearers must know, had been going on for some time between the

priests of the two rival temples regarding the relative supremacy of Kâli-*mâ* and her consort Shiv-*jee*——

Here the chairman himself called with alacrity, 'Order! Order! This meeting does not deal with such dogmatics,' and another and smaller murmur of assent followed.

The gentle-faced schoolmaster apologised again. There could be no doubt, at any rate, he said almost pathetically, that the uneducated mind was, as the poet said, liable to be tickled by straws, and so he conceived it to be his duty to draw the attention of the 'Society for Promoting the General Good of People' to this paper, which, he might add, he was going to pillory in his publication with scathing criticism. So, drawing a slip from his pocket, he began to read in the vernacular—

'*I, Kali, will come. In my dark month I will come for blood. Woe to them who seek to stay me in the city, since I will have blood on my altar whether the hands of strange men stay Me, or smite Me. For I am Kali the Death-Mother of all men, whether they will it or no. Yea! I will come.*'

The vague phrases, besprinkled with hollow-sounding mysterious Sanskrit words, brought a curious hush even to that assemblage, till Hâfiz Ahmad laughed arrogantly.

'Is that all, *pandit-jee*?' he asked; 'that bogey will do little.'

'As much, I venture to suggest,' put in Râm Nâth suavely, 'as the bogey of supposed invasion of domestic privacy for women.'

The Mohammedan, though he professed himself above such considerations, frowned. 'I demur. The caste prejudices will, in my opinion, be more difficult to place on common-sense footings.'

They had embarked on the fencing-match which, as often as not, ended discussion between these two recognised leaders of the two communities, Hindoo and Mohammedan, and the attention of the meeting had wandered after them, when a new voice brought it back. It was Chris Davenant's. Taller than most there, fairer, and of better birth than the generality of those who brave the dangers of foreign travel, he was the show man of young Nushapore for pure culture, as Râm Nâth was for ability; and as such he commanded attention.

'Gentlemen!' he said, 'it seems to me that this paper,

which *pandit* Narain Das has just read, will give our society an opportunity for practical work. It means nothing, or at most little, to any of us here. But none will deny it will mean much to many; to our friends—let us face the facts!—to our own families. And it is a dangerous paper, gentlemen! None know that better than we, who have passed from the influence of such words,'—here that faint desultory clapping became audible—'and it is just because we *have* so passed, that I ask this meeting what it is prepared to *do* in order to combat the possible, the probable effect of these mysterious threats?'

'Hear! hear!' came several voices. And then came silence; until the *pandit* said, in hurt tones—

'I have already told this meeting that I will publish in my monthly magazine, together with criticisms of the most scathing character——'

'And,' put in Râm Nâth, rising to the challenge in Chris Davenant's face, 'I venture to suggest, Mr. Chairman, that this meeting pass a resolution condemning——'

'And who will know what resolutions we pass, Mr. Secretary?' interrupted Chris, with a sudden passion which gave his face a look that was half hope, half wistful doubt; 'who will read your diatribes, Mr. Editor? *We!* We only, who pass the resolutions, who write the criticisms, who know already how to appraise that paper! Printed words, gentlemen, are no use to those who cannot read, resolutions are naught to those who never hear of them. But we have tongues; we can speak! We can, if we choose, throw the whole weight of our personal influence on the side of truth, even though that side be also the side of a government with which we have many a righteous feud.'

As he paused for breath, there was a murmur of approval for the eloquence, none for the thought it held. 'Gentlemen!' he went on, 'it is futile for any one here to deny that this paper aims at rousing religious opposition to *any* precautions whatever against the plague! Well! some of us here, myself among the number, hold that many of the precautions in the government programme *are* objectionable——'

'And more in the private instructions, if rumour says true,' put in Râm Nâth spitefully.

'I have listened to reasonable criticism, reasonable resentment, and I have agreed with it. But is there any one of us

here who would throw all precautions to the winds?' went on Chris, passing by the interruption; 'is there any one who really believes that this golden paper fell from heaven? If there are, I let them pass. But for the rest of us, I call upon you not to write, not to resolve, but to speak; to speak to our wives, our mothers, our sisters—to the timid women whom such threats alarm; briefly to throw our whole personal influence on what we know to be the side of truth.'

There was an instant's silence; then Hâfiz Ahmad, as chairman, said perfunctorily: 'I am sure we are all completely at one with our honourable friend. Such manifest attempts at preposterous intimidation deserve the heartiest contempt of educated minds.'

'I second that proposition,' added Râm Nâth as head of his following. 'We are morally bound to give heartiest co-operation in the difficult task before government, in so far as is compatible with strict deference to the private religious feeling of all parties concerned. That is the groundwork of true liberty.'

A fine scorn showed on Chris Davenant's face; he was about to speak when *pandit* Narain Das turned to him with a wistful apology in his, and said: 'Without demurring to his general principle, I would remind our honourable friend, whose educational career is a credit to our town, that our influence, alas! is but a broken reed. Our position, in a society of ignorami, is anomalous, not to say precarious. And if we too freely kick against the pricks, we are in danger of losing what we have, which would be undesirable. As John Morley says in his valuable work on compromise——'

Chris turned on him almost savagely. 'There is no need to preach compromise, *pandit-jee*! We practise it. We do not let our opinions influence our own conduct, yet we expect them to influence the conduct of our rulers! We write these opinions. Oh, yes! we write them! Why? Because we know that only those read them who agree with us! But which of us will go from here to-day, and braving opposition, disregarding personal considerations, tell, even their own immediate families, that the Brahmins who wrote that paper are—are *splendide mendax*!'

He could not help it! He was keenly alive to the legitimate fun made by the opponents of young India, out of its intolerable aptitude for unsuitable quotation, but he fell a

victim to it sometimes himself. So, as he paused before his own words—a house, as it were, divided against itself—he lost his opportunity. For a dapper little gentleman who, by reason of a high appointment under government, was generally allowed to apply the closure to heated or unwelcome discussions, had risen, and caught the chairman's eye.

'What our honourable and esteemed townsman, Mr. Krishn Davenund, has just said, must receive consensus of universal opinion, since it is doubtless of supreme importance to national life. Priest-craft, supernaturalism, *et hoc genus omne*, are clearly traits of low civilisation, just as popular government, enlargement of franchise, and diffusion of evolutionary theories are significant of higher. Still, Rome was not built in a day. Nor is there use in raising the wind, if we can't ride the whirlwind, or control the storm. Therefore, in the *interim*, pending wider liberty of speech, I propose that this meeting pass a unanimous resolution condemning such paltry attempts at cockering up superstitious feelings, and that the same be duly recorded in the minutes of our society.'

Before the relieved applause which greeted this diplomacy was over, the waste-paper basket beside Chris Davenant had received another contribution. His roll of manuscript, torn to shreds, lay in it, in obedience to a sudden, swift intuition that if he was ever to rise beyond the chaos of lofty aspirations, the strictly impersonal admiration for great deeds in his fellows, he must leave words behind.

So silent, alone, he walked home to his empty house, his empty life.

But others, though they passed homewards in batches still full of discussion, still drunk with words, were passing to environments which were, in a way, even more empty than his. So empty of the sentiments they had just been formulating, so much at variance with the ideals they had just professed, that the very imagination grows bewildered in the effort to reconcile the two.

Govind the editor, however, had less difficulty than most in accommodating his mental position to a stool stuck over the reeking gutter of a liquor shop, where he refreshed himself with a brandy-and-soda and an infamous cigar. He was in an evil temper, because the meeting, which he frequented chiefly because the speakers provided him with ideas wherewith to spice his own broadsheet, had been unusually

discreet; so he would have to write his own sedition; unless he could pick up some scurrilous news instead.

'Nay, friend! I know naught to suit thy purpose,' replied the stout sergeant of police who frequented the same liquor shop, to whom he applied; 'save the finding of the Lady-*sahib*'s jewel-box.'

'And the pearls?' asked Govind, taking out a greasy stump of pencil.

'The pearls!' echoed the policeman scornfully, 'as if pearls were to be found by us! They can be hid in a body's very mouth, and then, if there be not another mouth with a tongue in it, there is silence! But the box is enough to keep the file of the case open, and the inspector content for a while.'

'How many are in the lock-up concerning it?' asked Govind, out of the fulness of his knowledge regarding police methods.

'Six,' yawned the sergeant. 'The coolie who found the box broken and empty, flung in the bushes by the Lat-*sahib*'s house; he was setting the fireworks for the big spectacle to-morrow. He sold it to a pawnbroker. That makes two for us. Then a woman bought the velvet lining from a rag-merchant. That makes four. She gave it to Hashim, tailor, who works for the *Huzoors*, as a cap to her grandchild. And he, having doubts, informed us. So he makes five. Then the firework-maker's people were turbulent, therefore we arrested one of them to show diligence.'

'And there was naught in the box when it was found?' asked Govind. He was writing now on one of the smoothed-out squares of white waste-paper which lay in a pile beside the liquor seller, who used them for wiping the rims of the tumblers, out of deference to the caste prejudices of his customers against a general cloth.

'God knows!' yawned the policeman piously. 'The man saith not; but there were letters besides the trinkets and the pearls, and we may find *them*, if not the others. Folk will not lose a *cowrie*'s worth of waste-paper these hard times.'

'Ay!' assented the liquor seller, eyeing Govind askance. 'Mine had to be paid for, though some seem to think not. And paid high too, since the firework-makers were in the market for their squibs and crackers for to-morrow.'

A man lounging outside in the gutter laughed suddenly, viciously. 'They will find enough for *them* anyhow, even if

they *have* the police at their tails!' he said, moving off with a defiant *salaam* to the fat policeman.

'I would I had handcuffed a pair of them,' remarked the latter mildly. ''Twould have been one trouble, and 'tis well to save oneself what one can these hard times.'

'Trouble!' echoed a passer-by, shaking his head, 'there will be no saving of that in Nushapore. Jân-Ali-shân hath returned and brought the plague, so folk say.'

The liquor seller turned in quick interest to the sergeant of police.

'Dost know if he hath returned?' he asked; for the loafer was a customer who owed money, and must be got hold of while money was in his pockets.

For answer the policeman chucked away his cigar end, stumbled off the dais of the shop, and stood to attention, as a figure rounded the angle of the next crossway street, followed by a crowd of ragged half-naked urchins. It was Jân-Ali-shân himself, washed, shaved, spruce, in a second-hand suit of *khaki* uniform and a white helmet which he had redeemed from a pawnshop on the credit of his new appointment as foreman of works. Jân-Ali-shân, who, from sheer habit, had, on finding himself in the city with money in his pocket, gone straight for his old haunt. From the new resolutions, however, which with him always began with new work, he called for a 'gingerade plain' in a voice of authority, which made a little circle gather round him admiringly, as after humming a stave of 'Drink to me only with thine eyes,' while he was opening the bottle, he proceeded to pour its fizzing contents down his throat.

The interest of the crowd seemed to amuse him, he sate down on the plinth and drew out a handful of *pice* in lordly fashion.

'Two anna, over an' above,' he said, holding up the coins, 'and I don't want no change. So which of you noble earls,' here he turned to his following of lads, 'is goin' to fight for the balance? You understand? *Lurro abhi, jut put*, an' be *burra burra pailwân* for two pice a 'ed (fight now immediately and be great heroes).'

The vile admixture of tongues seemed quite comprehensible to those acquainted with Jân-Ali-shân's methods, for two urchins stepped forward at once, and the rest joined with the other loungers to form a ring.

John Ellison, loafer, leant back against the wall at his ease.

'Now then, *nap*,'[1] he began, 'back to back fair and square. None o' yer *nigger blarney*,[2] you young devil! Fight *seeda*,[3] or it ain't worth fightin' at all. And I won't 'ave no buttin' in the stummick. You're *pailwâns m'henda nahin* (heroes, not fighting rams). *Sumjha?*'

The boys professed to understand, and, having divested themselves of their last rag, stood like slim bronze statues in the sunlight.

'Are you ready?' asked Jân-Ali-shân with superb gravity. 'Then *chul* (go), an' may the Lord 'ave mercy on your souls.'

They were locked in each other's grip in a second in true Western fashion.

'*Shab-bash!*' said the holder of the stakes with an approving nod. 'That's wrestlin'. None o' yer slappin's an' buttin's and boo-in's. *Shab-bash!* boys. *Shab-bash!*'

The crowd grinned widely at the praise, and, as the combatants struggled and swayed, discussed their family history and took sides, after the manner of crowds all over the world. Quite a breath of anxiety ran through it as a fall came, but came sideways. There was no dust on the back yet!—there would not be!—yes! there would.

Aha! aha! there *was*, surely!

There would have been, doubtless, for the uppermost boy's small brown hand had freed itself for a second from its grip and sought blindly on the ground for that recognised weapon in Indian wrestling, dust for the adversary's eyes, had not Jân-Ali-shân, seeing the action, sprung to his feet, stooped over the writhing figures, and seizing the top one by the scruff of its neck, held it up by one hand and shaken it as a terrier shakes a rat.

'None o' yer monkey tricks, none o' yer *niggar blarneying*, you young sneak,' he said roughly, as he dropped his whimpering prisoner from mid air, 'or I'll make *mutti*[4] of you. *Bus!* (enough). T'other Johnny's *jeetgia* (won). Here, sonny! take your *do paisa*.'

The crowd, however, which had been betting freely on the event, hesitated; the supporters of the dust-thrower

[1] Measure.
[2] *Nigar bani*, lit. looking at, favouritism.
[3] Straight, fair.
[4] Lit. earth, a corpse.

grumbled. They were headed by Govind, who began with great pomp—

'I would have you aware, sir, that use of dust is not non-regulation in our code; therefore the other boy is victor.'

John Ellison looked at him condescendingly, and turned up the cuffs of his coat with unnecessary elaboration.

'Ain't it in your code, *baboo*?' he said, with equally elaborate civility, 'an' t' other chap 'as won, has he? I 'm glad t' hear it. But this is my show, and, by the Lord 'oo made me! I 'm goin' to run it myself. An' if any gentleman 'as a objection to make, let 'im make it now, or for ever after 'old 'is peace.'

The crowd made way for him hastily, as he drove a three-feet passage through it with his elbows; but as he walked jauntily down the bazaar, the boys fell in behind him and kept step, as he did, to the 'Wedding March,' which he whistled in reminiscent continuation of his last words. For they knew Jân-Ali-shân of old as one who, drunk or sober, always had a reward for fair fighting.

'What did the *M'lechcha*[1] say?' asked a grumbler who did not know English.

'That 'twas nothing to him what was our custom. It was his, and that settled it. It is their word! Well! let them say it! We will see, brothers, if it is true, will we not?' replied Govind viciously.

A murmur of approval ran through the bystanders, but an old dodderer with a white beard, who, in Eastern fashion, was dozing through his days, waiting for death, crouched up comfortably on a string bed set in the sun, said dreamily—

'Didst say it was Jân-Ali-shân? Yea! it was his word. I have heard him say it; and he keeps it, my sons! he keeps it!'

Govind turned on the speaker scornfully. 'Those were other times, *baba*, and another Jân-Ali-shân. The times have changed and men too——'

A thin musical laugh interrupted him. It came from Lateefa, the kite-maker, who was passing with his bundle of kites for sale.

[1] Lit. outcast.

'Lo! *baboo-jee*!' he said. 'I know naught of time but my poor portion of it, nor of man save my poor self! But I change not, and I am as others. We are like kites; the form changes not unless the maker chooses, and God, so say the Moulvies, changes not at all. He makes men on the old pattern ever; the rest is but dye and tinsel.'

So he passed on, tossing his bundle, and chanting the street-seller's cry—

'Your eyes use, and choose!
Use your eyes and choose!'

CHAPTER VII

CRACKERS AND SQUIBS

'*Tinkle, tinkle, ootel ish-star. Ha-a-vunder vart-oo-ar.*'
'*Tinkle, tinkle, ootel ish-star. Ha-a-vunder vart-oo-ar.*'
'*Tinkle, tinkle, ootel ish-star. Ha-a-vunder vart-oo-ar.*'

The damnable iteration went on and on, the fiddles twangled and squeaked, the drum bangers banged, the nautch-girl sidled, and smirked, and shrilled.

'*Tinkle, tinkle, ootel ish-star. Ha-a-vunder vart-oo-ar.*'

Lesley Drummond, sitting in the front row of guests at the reception given by the nobles and landed proprietors of the Province to welcome Sir George Arbuthnot to his new office, shut her eyes at last in sheer despair of being able to reconcile the senses of hearing and sight; then opened them again to stare with unappeasable curiosity into the blaze of light, veiled by a fine film of misty smoke, in which all things seemed clear, yet dim.

It came from the prism-hung chandeliers which hid the low white-marble ceiling, from the wretched paraffin wall-lamps hung against the white-marble pillars, from the paper lanterns swinging from the scalloped white-marble arches. But it came most of all from the garden beyond the arches in which this white-marble summer-palace of a dynasty of dead kings stood, centring the formal walks and water-courses; for it was lit up in long close rows of soft twinkling lights stretching away into the purple shadows of the night, until, climbing to every line, every curve of the purple shadow of the distant city, they showed like new stars upon the purple shadow of the sky.

The radiance of it, the brilliance of it, dazzled the eyes; the dimness, the misty dreaminess of it clouded the brain. She felt drugged, hypnotised out of realities, as she looked towards the dais where Sir George, the Star of his Order

almost hidden by one of the huge tinsel garlands which had been thrown round the neck of the guests as they entered, sat in a gilt chair, his solitary figure outlined harshly, by reason of his dark political uniform, against the background of white-marble tracery. Thence she looked to the English ladies in gay *décolletés* dresses who, with a sprinkling of black coats and red tunics, banked the dais on either side. So to the line of officials and soldiers edging the gangway below the dais. Finally, on to the hosts themselves who sate behind in rows. Rows on rows ablaze with colour and sparkle. Rows on rows imperturbable, passive, without a smile or a frown for the scene in which they bore so large a part.

So far, however, despite those great tinsel garlands which were so distracting a novelty upon black coats, scarlet tunics, and *décolletés* dresses, a certain relevancy to the central idea, embodied in that solitary figure of an elderly Englishman raised above the rest, was not wanting in the details of the spectacle.

But what, thought Lesley, could be said of that group upon the square of red and green-flowered Brussels carpet spread immediately in front of the dais? Spread between the gilt sofa where she sat with Jerry between her and Lady Arbuthnot, and a similar gilt sofa on the other side occupied by the general's wife and her two daughters.

What an inconceivably unsuitable surrounding they made, five Englishwomen and a child, to those other five and a child? Two ragged drum bangers, two dissipated fiddle and guitar twangers, a dreamy-looking boy doing nothing, and the usual posturing dancer, stout as to figure, bunchy as to petticoats, with glued bandeaux of hair and a nasal quavering voice which paused only for furtive swallowings of the betel-nut she was chewing all too palpably!

'*Tinkle, tinkle, ootel ish-star.*' She trilled with an affable, opulent curve of hip and hand towards the *sahib logue* collectively, for whose delectation she was singing 'Englis fassen'; an accomplishment she had learned from a girl who had been taught hymns in a mission school.

'*Ha-a-vunder vart-oo-ar*'—she simpered with a special coquettish flirt of her fingers and full petticoat for that respectable father of a family, Sir George, who, honest man, sat horribly conscious, still more horribly bored, yet patient,

waiting for the master of the ceremonies to ask him if he had had enough.

Enough?

He looked past the pirouettings to that thin line of white faces, bored yet patient like his own, which fringed those rows on rows of impassive dark ones, and stifled his yawns duteously for the sake of the Empire. No such reasons of state, however, swayed Jerry, who, dapper and dainty in knee-breeches, silk stockings, ruffles, and a little garland of his own, sate fidgeting and yawning, yawning and fidgeting. As he looked across the pirouettings he could see his dearest Mr. Raymond dozing with dignity in a chair opposite, with a peculiarly magnificent garland festooned over him. It was bigger than anybody's but dad's, Jerry told himself, feeling a trifle aggrieved, and he wanted to ask why it was so large, when Mr. Raymond was sitting oh! ever so far back!

'*Tinkle, tinkle, ootel ish-star!*'

The drums banged, the fiddles squeaked, the dancer postured, and Jerry yawned with commendable monotony, till, suddenly, the little lad's patience gave way at the two hundred and fifty-sixth time of asking the question—'*Ha-a-vunder vart-oo-ar.*'

'Please!' he said, in his clear child's voice, 'it is the Star of India dad's wearin'. The Queen gave it him for doin' his duty.'

'Hush—hush, Jerry!' came breathlessly from his guardians, but the connection of ideas had been too palpable. A titter which broke from the ladies behind him made Nevill Lloyd—who as aide-de-camp flanked the dais, resplendent in his horse artillery uniform—absolutely choke in his effort to be dignified, and the joyous crow which resulted quite upset the general commanding. Then this chuckle from the right row of officialdom did for the Secretary-to-Government heading the left, so that his gurgle was the signal for a general roar of laughter to go echoing up into the arches; general so far only as the white faces were concerned. The dark ones of the hosts were immovable, keeping even their surprise to themselves.

'Some one ought, surely, to explain,' said Lesley with a half-puzzled frown, as, the laughter ending, a general stir of relieved chatter showed that the audience had seized on the interruption as an end.

'Explain, my dear?' echoed Sir George, when his wife took advantage of the stir to repeat Lesley's suggestion, and point out the dancing-girl standing sullen, uncertain, whispering to the drum and fiddle; 'I don't think it's worth it, and I don't see how it's to be done. Besides, they ought to have laughed too—they really ought! That crow of Lloyd's——'

'I'm awfully sorry, sir,' put in the offender, trying to be penitent through his smiles; 'I'll tell you what I'll do, Lady Arbuthnot. Raymond is bossing the supper for them from the club, and all that. He's president of the committee of entertainment, so I'll get him——'

Sir George frowned. 'We needn't trouble Mr. Raymond, Captain Lloyd. And as for the interruption, Grace, it rested with me to stop the nautch-girl at any time, and they saw we were amused. That is really all they want.'

'Just so, sir,' assented the Secretary-to-Government, a trifle ashamed of his lapse from strict etiquette. 'And she had been at it nearly the proper time. Only five minutes short of the half-hour we gave them. And you can use those, sir—as the fireworks will barely be ready—in having some of the notables up for a talk. That will set the business more than right.'

It seemed so, indeed, judging by the radiant faces of the favoured few, and the hopeful interest of the many, who crowded round, grateful for a word, even, from some lesser light.

So from its Eastern formality the scene changed to Western ways. The crowd of well-dressed women became interspersed with red coats and political uniforms, a buzz of voices and laughter replaced the silence broken only by the shrillings and twanglings.

The change was a peculiarly welcome one to Mrs. Chris Davenant, who, having, of course, been seated in strict accordance with her husband's rank, right at the back among the commercial set, had been growing sulky over her chance of getting into better society. She had not, for the last two days, snubbed Mr. Lucanaster persistently, in order that she and half a dozen tailors summoned hastily should have time to turn out a gown worthy of Paris, simply for the purpose of having *him* compliment her on the result. She flew at higher game, and the movement of the crowd brought her the quarry.

'Married a native, did she?' commented a big man in political uniform with a row of medals, who was in from an out-station for the show, and had asked who the wearer of the flame-coloured satin was; flame-colour with ruby sparklings on the curves of hip and bosom out of which the fair white shoulders rose barely. 'Well! I, personally, don't find the husband in it, if the wife's pretty! Introduce me, will you, or get some one else to do it who knows her, if you don't.'

The man to whom he spoke looked round helplessly, and, his eye falling on Jack Raymond, he appealed to him. People in Nushapore had a trick of applying to the secretary of the club for odd jobs.

'Ask Lucanaster,' said Jack Raymond grimly, 'he knows her awfully well, and I don't.'

And thereinafter he watched this seething of the kid in its mother's milk with an almost fiendish amusement. It relieved him, for one thing, of the necessity for speaking to Mrs. Chris himself. But as he passed the group which was every instant growing larger round the flame-coloured satin, he said a word to Chris who was standing listlessly on the outside of it.

'Seeing a lot of old friends, I expect.'

Chris Davenant's flush made him curse the careless remark, and at the same moment some one came hurriedly up behind him and laid a hand on his arm. It was a tall old man with a dash and a swing about him still; gorgeous still, though his brocades were worn and old, and with great ropes of pearls wound round him, and a straight bar of grey moustache on his keen brown face, matching the grey heron's plume in his low turban. Briefly, a Rajpoot nobleman of the old style.

'*Ai!* counsellor of the old,' he said, affectionate confidence struggling with vexation in his face, 'give me some of thy wisdom once more.'

'Hullo, Rana-*sahib*! what's up? something gone wrong with the fireworks?' asked Jack Raymond, turning at once. His tone was friendliness itself. And no wonder. Many a time had he, hard rider as he was, wondered at the old Thakoor of Dhurmkote's dash and pluck after boar. Many a time had they sate up in *machâns* after tiger together, and many a time had Jack—wiser for the reckless, proud old sinner than he was for himself—urged him to retrench, to

keep from the usurers. In vain. The old man, head of his clan, would only say, 'Not so, *sahib*. If the son had lived, perhaps. But the tiger took advantage of his youth. So let me live and die as my fathers lived and died.' And then he would launch out into further extravagance, as fine a specimen of the native gentleman before we meddled with the mould, as could be found in the length and breadth of the land.

'Wrong with my fireworks?' he echoed indignantly. 'There is nothing wrong with them, though the others stinted me, from the beginning, out of jealousy! Yet I had fooled them. But now, because folk laughed at God knows what, they want them earlier. It is jealousy again. It is to ruin my reputation as *connoisseur*. I, who have spent lacs on fireworks. I, who to prove what I could do with the miserable pittance assigned to me, have paid Meena Buksh, firework-maker, five thousand rupees extra—I had but two allowed me, *Huzoor*—out of mine own pocket, or rather out of Salig Râm the usurer's, since I reft it from him with threats—he owns land, see you, as well as money——'

Here the old man, who had been carried away thus far by his grievance, became aware that Jack Raymond's companion was not, as he had deemed, some young Englishman who would either not care to listen or would not understand if he did; and in any case would not make mischief out of the confidence. For Chris Davenant, hemmed in a corner beyond escape, had been unable to repress a smile at the old chieftain's method of proving his good management and economy.

'Let me introduce my friend, Mr. Krishn Davenund, Rana-*sahib*,' said Jack Raymond hastily, noticing the old man's haughty stare. 'I think you knew his father, *Pandit* Sri Pershâd, judge of the Small Cause Court.'

Considering that the magistrate in question, being more or less in feudal relations with the Thakoors of Dhurmkote, had strained many a point in favour of their extravagance, the acquaintance was indisputable; yet the Rana-*sahib*'s *salaam* was of the curtest compatible with courtesy to the introducer, and he drew Jack Raymond aside to continue in a lower voice—

'They want me to be ready in ten minutes, and that means ruin; for some fool set fire to a bit of my best set piece, and 'twill take twenty to repair.'

'But why not begin with something else?' suggested his hearer.

The Thakoor's face was a study in triumph and disappointment. 'Because it is a welcome to the Lât-*sahib*, and a welcome must come first. And it is new also—a welcome in roman candles and sulphur stars; my reputation is in it.'

'Then why not show it as it is, and explain the accident?'

The Thakoor looked uncertain. 'That might be. How would it look, think you, *sahib*, "God," then a blank—for that is where the damage comes in—"our new Lieutenant-Governor"? Would it be understanded, think you? Would it look well—in Roman candles and sulphur stars?'

'God blank—that is where the damage lies,' repeated Jack Raymond thoughtfully, and then he laughed. He had to recover himself, however, hastily at the old man's bewildered face, and say gravely, 'I don't think it *would* look very well, Rana-*sahib*, especially in Roman candles and sulphur stars.' Here another laugh obtruded itself, and he added as a cover to it, 'But I can tell you what I *can* do for you—refreshments. I know *they* are ready. I'll go off now and get the "roast-beef" sounded.'

The old chieftain stood looking after him as he went off enthusiastically.

'May the gods keep him! that is a man,' he said aloud to himself. 'If all the *sahibs* were as he, a friend——'

'India would be the happier. She needs such friends,' said Chris Davenant suddenly. He had been trying to make up his mind ever since the meeting at Hâfiz Ahmad's house, to take some decided step towards organising a real party of progress. To do this in a way that would ensure confidence with both the Government and the people, it was necessary to secure some men of real influence; and the Thakoor was one. His word went far, both West and East; and fate had placed him within earshot. So Chris had spoken; his heart, to tell truth, in his mouth, as the old man turned scowling.

But something in the young one's face, perhaps a look of his dead father, perhaps its own inherent goodness, made the Thakoor, instead of ignoring the remark, say curtly—

'I see it not. What friends does India need?'

Then Chris pulled himself together for speech, and the old man listened, first contemptuously, then with tolerance.

'Thou speakest well,' he said, nodding approval. 'And as thou sayest, the people need leaders, not *baboos*. Come to my house some day, and——'

'Have you my shawl, Chris?' said a woman's voice, interrupting the invitation. 'Oh, I don't want it now, not till the fireworks, but you can bring it then, to the supper-room.' So, satisfied at having shown her husband that if *he* were talking to pearls and brocade, *she* had annexed a uniform and medals; satisfied also at having shown both the uniform and the brocade in what good company they were, Mrs. Chris Davenant passed on, all white arms and back, edged perfunctorily with flames and rubies.

'Who—who is that *mem*?' asked the old Rajpoot swiftly, for one of the white arms had, incredible to say, nudged Chris's black one, to attract his attention.

Chris gave back the stare defiantly. 'That is my wife, Thakoor-*sahib*.'

The old chieftain stood bewildered for a moment; then he gave a scornful laugh.

'Men of thy sort are no friends to India, *baboo-jee*,' he said. So, with a twirl of the straight grey moustache, he strode away, leaving Chris more lonely than ever.

So absolutely alone, that the sheer physical pain of his loneliness drove him on towards the sound of laughter and voices, the popping of champagne corks, which came from the marble-screened verandah where the refreshment-tables stood.

It was full of English people only, since this part of the entertainment was left by the hosts in alien hands; but through the marble lace-work filling up the arches, the softly radiant lines of light, climbing upwards to the stars could be seen, and the hum of the multitude waiting beyond the garden to see the fireworks was audible.

'Have you all you want, Miss Drummond?' said Jack Raymond as he passed. He looked well, she thought, and wore his garland with a difference. Jerry had hold of it in a second, detaining him—

'Oh! I say! please, what a whopper!' he exclaimed. 'Why did they give it you?'

'For doing my duty, of course,' he laughed. 'I say, young man, you upset the apple-cart, didn't you?'

Lesley looked her regret. 'It was awful! And so much

worse not to explain. It was so rude. I don't wonder the people dislike us.'

Jack Raymond's face took a curiously obstinate look. 'Perhaps you would like to explain—there is the Thakoor of Dhurmkote; he is more like an Englishman in his mind than any native I know. Shall I introduce him, and let you get it off your conscience?'

A minute after the little group—Jack Raymond explaining, the old Rajpoot listening, Lesley waiting for the laugh to come, and Jerry watching puzzled, doubtful how far the joke would be against him—gave Grace Arbuthnot, in her solitude of honour, a pang of envy. It was dull always talking to the proper people! And Jack Raymond need not keep aloof from her so pointedly. It was so foolish. As if it were possible——

In a sort of denial, she just touched the gold lappets of Sir George's coat—the faintest, lightest finger-touch—as he stood talking to the general; but he turned at once.

'Do you want anything, dear?'

She flushed, and laughed; a pretty flush, a pretty laugh, chiefly at her own impulsiveness.

'Nothing, dear, absolutely nothing,' she said, and he smiled back at her. None the less, she still watched the group enviously.

But Lesley, for her part, was beginning to wish she had not joined it; for the discovery of her own mistakes was never a pleasant process to the young lady, and something in the old Thakoor's face warned her she was out of her depth.

'*Ap ne suchh furmaya. Ap ne be shakk suchh furmaya,*' came the courteous old voice, as Jack Raymond's ceased, and the courteous old face bent in grave approval over the child's.

'Please! what does he say?' asked Jerry, sober as a judge.

Jack Raymond had not a smile either, though he looked hard at Lesley. 'He says, translated literally, that "You caused the truth to be told; without doubt you caused it to be told."'

Jerry heaved a huge sigh of relief, and looked up into the old face, his childish one full of confidence.

'In course I did. I knew it was the Star of India, 'cos mum told me. An' I don't know why the grown-ups

laughed; but he didn't—he's a nice old man, an' I like him.'

So, to the old chieftain's inexpressible delight, he tucked his hand into the Rajpoot's, and said, 'Thank you, sir!'

'You and I are out of it, Miss Drummond,' remarked Jack Raymond, as, after permission asked and granted, the Thakoor went off, proud as Punch, to show the *chota sahib*, who had only spoken the truth, to the rest of the committee.

That 'you and I' lingered somehow pleasantly in the girl's memory, so that when she returned to Lady Arbuthnot's side, and the latter (somewhat to her own surprise) felt impelled to make some remark on the conversation she had noticed, Lesley replied carelessly—

'Yes! I think I like him better than I did; he isn't half bad.'

Grace Arbuthnot felt suddenly as if she could have boxed the speaker's ears. Not half bad! And, except in position, and one or two things which did not, could not, show in mere acquaintance, Jack Raymond had changed very little since the days when he had been her ideal of all a man should be. What was more, that ideal of hers had not changed at all! Yet here was this girl thinking him not half bad!

The advent of the general's wife, however, full—as usual—of fears about everything, created a diversion. Was not Lady Arbuthnot afraid of catching cold in going out to watch fireworks? To be sure, she was wearing a high dress, which was perhaps more suitable. But, anyhow, was she not afraid of getting it spoilt with the oil and the dirt? And if she was not, did not the underlying doubt as to the general safety of the position disturb her? Supposing it was only a plot to get the whole European community together, unarmed, and blow them up? After the mutiny anything was possible.

'My husband shall take you in charge,' interrupted Grace, 'and as he has to be escorted everywhere by the biggest swells, *you* will be quite safe, for they would hardly blow themselves up!'

She spoke politely enough, but as she passed out to the terrace, she said aside to Lesley, 'What a fool that woman is! yet she is not much worse than half the others. If anything could make us lose our hold on India, it will be the women—as it was in the mutiny.'

Jerry, who had come back, was holding his mother's hand, and looked up all eyes and ears.

'Do you think there will be one weally?' he asked, with quite a tremble of eagerness in his voice.

'No, Jerry, certainly not,' she replied quickly, vexed he should have heard; 'and if there were, there is no use in being frightened.'

His face flushed crimson. 'It—it isn't *that*,' he began, gripping her hand tighter, then paused; perhaps because at that moment a line of coloured fires swept in curves against the background of purple shadow to form the legend—'God bless our new Lieutenant-Governor.'

A hum of applause, not for the words, but the Roman candles and sulphur stars, rose from beyond the garden.

On the terrace, too, admiration was loud and the old Thakoor's delight was boundless. He was here, whispering Sir George that he had only been allowed two thousand rupees; there, apologising to the rest of the committee for imaginary shortcomings, or down in the smoke and noise below, urging the pyrotechnists to be quick, to spare no pains, to show the *Huzoors* what they could do.

'That will we!' muttered an underling as he stooped to his task; the letting off, like minute-guns, of the detonating maroons which the native loves.

And another man, as he bent to touch a fuse with his port-fire, gave a sinister laugh, and remarked under his breath that scarred necks could do without pearls!

So, in hot haste, the set pieces succeeded each other—the Catherine-wheels span, dropping coloured tears; the fire-fountains played; the great clouds of smoke, edged with many tinted reflections of the lights, drifted sideways, and beyond them the balloons sailed up one by one to form new constellations in the sky; but the curved rockets paused with a little sob of despair, and sank back, dropping the stars which they had hoped to set in high heaven.

And above the noise, the bustle, the popping of squibs and crackers, came the sound of an English military band and the minute-guns of the maroons.

Lesley Drummond on the lower terrace watching, listening, was conscious of a curiously new sense of enjoyment, almost exultation. Her life, the emotionally restricted life of the modern girl who, having freed herself from minor

interests, has not yet found wider ones, had been, though she would never have admitted it, cold and grey. But to-night, for the first time, she realised that her nature held other possibilities. The dim darkness, the faint light, the mystery encompassing the mirth around her, even Jack Raymond's voice asking carelessly, as he passed, how she was getting on, made her feel dizzy with pleasure.

'We are having a splendid time,' she answered joyously. 'Aren't we, Jerry?'

But Jerry answered nothing. He was much too absorbed; his wide grey eyes were wider than ever, staring out at the fireworks.

'What is it, Jerry?' she asked curiously. 'What do you see?'

'Oh! nuffing yet,' answered the little lad; 'but if it was to come——'

As he spoke a sudden scream rose from a group of ladies close by. A man, running as for dear life to set and light a fresh row of fire-fountains, squibs, and crackers, had stumbled, tripped, fallen against the low parapet, and in his attempt to save himself had dropped some of the fireworks over on to the terrace. Nor was that all; the flaming, spouting gerb he carried in his left hand as a port fire, had swung round on them, and there they were in the middle of gauze and muslin —alight!

A knot of squibs was the first to explode, darting hither and thither wickedly, like snakes, amid the frills and flounces, amid the screams!

'Keep back! Keep back!' shouted the men; and some had their coats off in a second, while others held the ladies' filmy dresses back, beating the sparks off with their hands, or stamping them out with their feet.

But there was a round black something, with just a tiny glow sizzling slowly into it, which no one noticed as it lay half hidden under a velvet gown; no one but Jerry——

The next instant he was standing with it in his hands, confused for the moment by the dense circle round him through which he saw no way for a small boy.

'Drop it, drop it!' shouted some one, and Lesley was beside him trying to snatch the detonator from him. But he dodged from her with an appealing cry.

'It's mine. It weally is my shell—it weally is!'

He dodged Nevill Lloyd also, who dashed at him yelling—'Drop it, you young fool'; and he might have gone on dodging others till that tiny glow sizzled in to the powder, if some one else, realising the situation and the few seconds' grace that remained, had not shouted—

'Hold tight, Jerry! Hold tight!'—and so, with that reassuring request had run to the child, caught him in his arms, and forced a way through the crowd to the parapet.

'Now, my lad, heave!' came the order.

And Jerry, who had held tight, heaved, since *these* were reasonable orders. Heaved not an instant too soon, however, for the round black thing was still so close when it changed to a flash, a flame, a roar, that it left Jack Raymond and the child wholly dazed and half blind, all singed and powder-grimed.

They were still standing so, bewildered, the man's face and the child's close together disguised by their very griminess into quaint likeness, when Grace Arbuthnot came up to them.

'He isn't hurt,' said Jack Raymond, quickly setting down the child, partly to prove his words, partly because he wished to dissociate himself from the situation as far as possible. The action, however, brought him closer to her eyes, and something in them, something in the faint perfume of heliotrope about her dress, the perfume he remembered so well, made him feel ashamed of his own thought.

'He is really not hurt,' he continued in a low voice for her ear alone. 'And he behaved—as I should have expected your son to behave.'

He had not meant to say so much, but something of the old confidence seemed to have returned to him with the old memory; and to her also, for she shook her head and said, almost with a smile—

'He is not a bit like me—he is far more like you.' She paused, startled at her own unconsidered words, and looked at him with a sudden shrinking in her face.

'Very,' he replied, catching up the boy again. 'We are both black sheep. Come along, my hero, and scrub some of the likeness off.'

But, as he carried Jerry away on his shoulder to the dressing-room, he told himself that she was right. The boy *was* like him. Now that it had been suggested to him, he saw it clearly. Not in face, but in the nameless ways

which show a likeness in the inward stuff that has gone, possibly, to make up a very dissimilar outside.

The explanation was simple, of course. It was a case of reversion. He himself had always been counted a typical Raymond, and Jerry, through his mother, had harked back to that distant, almost-forgotten ancestor. Something had made the current set that way once more; that was all.

But what something? Was it possible that the mind had this power as well as the body?

He swung the child to the attendant grimly, and bade him wash the *chota sahib's* face, and be sure to take off all the black.

That likeness, at any rate, need not remain. The other left him curiously helpless, curiously ashamed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TEMPLE OF VISESHWAR

CHRIS had followed his wife into the supper-room with the vague hope of feeling that he had a place somewhere, that he belonged to something, even to her. He had found her surrounded by strangers, and evidently forgetful of his very existence.

So a resentment had come to lessen his self-pity; resentment at many things. What right, for instance, had that proud old semi-savage to say that such as he were no friends to India? It was a lie. Such as he were its best friends. Yet, as he made the assertion, he knew it needed proof. What had such as he done to show their friendship? Very little. Even he himself——

A sudden determination to act came upon him; a resolve not to let another day pass without showing that he, at least, knew which way true friendship lay.

So, partly in disgust at the trivialities around him, partly from a restless desire to think the matter out once for all, he told his wife curtly that he was leaving the dogcart at her disposal, and passed out through the garden into the almost deserted roads beyond.

The very thought of Shark Lane, however, was repellent in his present frame of mind; avoiding that direction, therefore, he wandered on aimlessly, conscious only at first that—after the glare and the noise—the darkness, the stillness, was restful to eyes, to heart, to brain. He did not think at all. For the time he was absolutely at fault, utterly depolarised.

So he felt startled, roused to a definite sensation of mingled pleasure and pain, when, forced to pull up by a shadowy void before him, he found it was the river; that, despite the confusion in his mind, his body had led him to the old way of salvation, to the old purification.

The night was too dark for him to see what lay before

him; but his memory held its every detail. These were the bathing-steps, and below him lay the oldest building in Nushapore, the temple of Viseshwar. Here, to the insignificant block of rough-hewn stone tapered to a spire which rose square and bare from the very water, his mother had brought him as a child. Here, with childish delight in the action, childish disregard of its meaning, he had hung his jasmin garlands round the smooth upright black cone, which was all the shrine held for worship; yet which, even so, had been to his child's ignorance a god; as such in a way familiar, comprehensible, commonplace.

But now it was neither; now to his wider knowledge it had gained so much in mystery, in awe, by being symbol of the great incomprehensible problem of life and death, that, as he stood in that wedding-garment of culture—a suit of dress-clothes—looking down through the darkness to where he knew that *lingam* must rise, smoother, more worn by worship than ever, a shiver ran through him at the thought that there, among the withered chaplets at its feet, humanity had knelt for ages and found no answer to the riddle of life.

He sat down mechanically on the uppermost of the steps, and gave himself up, as it were, to the night, conscious of a vague content that it should be so dark.

To begin with, it hid many things best left unseen—himself most of all! For that meant forgetfulness of much. His dress-clothes, for instance, and things to be classed with them! Then it hid the railway bridge—strange sight in such environment—which spanned the river a few yards below the little spit of rock, ending the steps, on which the more modern temple sacred to Kâli, Shiva's consort, had been built. But something more modern still found foothold on that same spit of rock, though farther out, hidden below the levels of the river. This was the first pier of the railway bridge, from which the two drawbridges—one towards the town, the other towards the river—were worked; thus securing the passage against attack from either side. The pier itself rose sheer from the water, a solid block of masonry, and was prolonged into a tower, gated at each end.

Chris, picturing it in his mind's eye, thought how quaint a neighbour it was even to Kâli's temple, though her cult could not claim the mystery, the significance, of the other. Hers was the cult of ignorance, of terror; and his——

He was a Smarrta Brahmin by birth, and as he sate there in the darkness, thinking of that upright stone—severe, rigid in its mysticism—and then of the many-armed, blood-stained idol in the temple beyond, a proud exultation in his own priesthood to the older cult surged up in him.

He had almost forgotten his birthright, forgotten that he had been called by God to a place of honour—to the place of teacher; that his was the right to explain the mystery to the people, to show them the way of salvation.

But he remembered it now, and all insensibly a balm came to his pain from the knowledge of what lay about him, unseen, yet familiar. He sate, listening to the lap of the river on the foot-worn steps, picturing to himself its fringe of dead flower-petals from the dead day's worship; and even the stir in the vague shadow of the *pipal* trees, telling of the sacred monkeys who with the dawn would descend to claim their share of offerings with the gods, seemed to still his own restlessness.

And as he listened, feeling, more than thinking, the asceticism of many a holy ancestor who had left the world behind to follow his ideal of good, rose up in suggestion that he should do so also.

Why not? Why not claim his inherited right of sainthood in order to preach his doctrine? Was not that, after all, the only thing worth doing in this life? Was not this the only reality? Was not all else '*Maya*' or deception?

Such glimpses of the real beyond the unreal come to most of us at times, making us feel the spin of the round world we have deemed so steady beneath our feet, making us feel the fixity of the stars above us, the mysterious denial of sunset, the illimitable promise of dawn.

And when they come, peace comes with them.

It came to Krishn Davenund, making him forget the red Hammersmith omnibus and all things pertaining thereto, as he sat feeling the familiar touch of the darkness, until in the east, beyond the river, the grey glimmer of coming light in the sky showed him the curved shadow of the world's horizon, and after a time the grey glimmer of the curved river came to show him the straight shadow of the temple.

Then, in the vague light, he stood up, with a vague light in his mind also. As he did so, something fell from his arm. It was his wife's shawl, which he had been carrying

unconsciously all the time. As he picked it up, the coincidence of its faint pinkish colour banished the regret which came to him at having forgotten to give it her ere leaving. For this was *yogi* colour, so called because it is worn by all ascetics.

His English wife had admired the delicate salmon-pink, and he had therefore had her white Rampore shawl dyed that tint. Strange indeed! A thousand times strange, that this should be close to his hand now!

The cue thus given was followed, and with a passion which stifled his sense of bathos, he was the next instant throwing off his dress-clothes. So, with the thin, fine shawl about his nakedness, he passed down the steps towards the river, towards the sacrament of his race and caste.

The chill touch of the water sent his hot blood to heart and brain. He could scarcely keep his voice to the orthodox whisper, as he began the secret ritual which he had not repeated for years—

> '*Om! Earth! Air! Heaven! Om!*
> Let us worship the supreme splendour of the Sun.
> May his light lighten our darkness.'

The words blent with the silvery tinkle of the water falling back from his upraised hands, and at the familiar sound a stir came from the branches of the *pipal* trees behind him; and from the shadowy water below them a couple of shelldrakes sailed out, with their echoing cry, to the lighter level before him.

The sound of that first libation to the gods had awakened the temple world.

As yet, however, he and nature had worship to themselves.

Therefore, waist deep in the water, he stood free to dream once more that he was twice born, regenerate, raised high above the herd.

Yet free also to return to the new ways if he chose, since there was none to see, as yet——

But ere he had finished the ritual, an old man, still half asleep, came yawning down the steps, carrying a tray of little platters filled with coloured powders. Having reached the water's very edge, he set these in a row, and kept an eye on Chris; for he was the *pujâri* of the temple, with the right, for a small fee, to re-mark the bathers with their proper caste marks.

'What race, my son?' he asked drowsily, as Chris came up out of the river.

The question sent a vast pride through the young man. With bare limbs scarce hidden by the dripping shawl, he stood hesitating for a brief second, and then squatted down beside the familiar earthen platters.

'Brahmin. *Shiv-bakht*,'[1] he said.

The old man *salaamed* ere reaching for the sacred white gypsum, which is brought from the snows of Amar-nath; and once more that pride of race swept through the soul whose body awaited its sign of election.

But the swift cold touch on his forehead which followed woke Chris to realities, to the question 'Do I mean it?' And the whispering kiss of other bare feet upon the steps warned him that, if he wished time for deliberation, he must remove his tell-tale garments of civilisation before the light made them manifest. If these were hidden away, he himself, in his *yogi* coloured shawl, could easily pass muster; especially if he retreated to the least-frequented part of the steps, where they ended in a ruined wall, split by the *pipal* tree-roots.

Here, then, he found some convenient crevices for his clothes, and after spreading his shawl to dry in orthodox fashion, sat down beside it in the recognised attitude of meditation, his arms crossed on his knees, his chin resting on them. He was not likely to be recognised, even by broad daylight; for the companions of his later years were not of those who worship.

He would have leisure therefore to think, to decide. But once more he reckoned without himself, without the swift response of his senses to the once familiar sights and sounds. The causeless laughter of women filling their water-pots, the tinkle of their anklets, the cries of the flower-sellers, the ceaseless splash of water falling on water, the very leapings and chatterings of the monkeys, putting off time in play till the bathings should end in offerings—all these made connected thought impossible, while eyes and ears were open.

In despair at last, he flung the half-dried shawl over his head, stuffed his fingers into his ears, and, leaning back against a tree-trunk, tried to forget where he was; tried not to feel those white bars on his forehead which seemed to burn

[1] Worshipper of Shiva.

into his brain. But, in the effort to answer that question, 'Shall I go or stay?'—the effort to remember and yet to forget, he fell into dreamland; finally into sleep. And as he slept, Fate took the answer into her own hands, and turned his tragedy into comedy; for a small and curious monkey who had watched the secretion of those dress-clothes from afar, took advantage of his slumbers to creep down stealthily to a crevice, and make off with its contents —namely, a pair of trousers!

The monkey, however, being small, was soon dispossessed of his prize; a bigger one claimed it, and sent the first owner to whimper and gibber indignation from the topmost branches, and then grin fiendishly as a yet bigger one despoiled *his* despoiler. And so, unerringly, the garment of culture passed to the stronger, till the biggest old male of the lot, after inspecting every seam and trying to crack every button, conceived that it *must* be some kind of adornment, and, after hanging the legs, stolewise, in front, the seat, cloakwise, behind, crossed its arms over its stomach, feeling satisfied it had solved that problem.

Meanwhile, Chris had awakened to the impossibility of remaining where he was; for even his brief return to the normal in sleep had been sufficient to convince him of the hopelessness of attempting to return to that older standpoint. So, the day having advanced with the giant strides of an Indian dawn, he rose to retrieve his clothes, and sneak off with them to some quiet spot.

As he did so, however, the sight of some one standing just above him made him squat down again and cover himself once more with the shawl. For it was his new foreman of works, John Ellison, who from the top of the steps was looking down affably, nodding to the old *pujâri* (who had by this time a circle of customers awaiting hall-mark), and humming the baptismal hymn which begins, 'In token that thou shalt not fear,' between the salutations of '*Ram-ram*' (pronounced with a short *a*) which he showered on the bathers as they passed and repassed.

''Tis Jân-Âli-shân,' said one in answer to a question from a stranger. 'He feeds the monkeys.'

'And when Sri Hunumân's monkeys are fed by him, the feasting of Sri Yama's[1] crocodiles is not far off,' put in a

[1] The king of death; his emblem is a crocodile, *i.e.* death will be busy.

listener, emphasising his allusion to the God of Death by a placid look towards a tinsel-bound corpse swung to a bamboo, which two men were carrying slantways across the steps to the burning place below the railway bridge.

More than one amongst the bathers, overhearing the remark, nodded assent, and looked with a vague fear at the loafer who had seated himself a few steps down, and taken off his battered billy-cock; for being Sunday he was off duty and uniform.

'*Ram-ram*,' he said, with a general wave of the hand. 'So it's the old game still. Sunlight soap, monkey brand, and A1 copper-bottomed at Lloyd's doing a fire insurance! Lordy Lord! I might 'ave bin 'ere last Sunday, instead o' last year. An' 'ows Mr. 'Oneyman?'

The last word, intended for Hunumân, evidently conveyed a meaning to the whole remark, for many faces grinned, and the old *pujâri* salaamed with all the difficult gravity of a child who knows some time-worn jest is nigh.

'Sri Hunumân hath been well, since the *Huzoor* fed him on quinine pills hid in Shiv-*jee's* raisins last year. Ho! ho! ho! that was a spectacle!'

A priest with a trident on his forehead chuckled too. 'Yea! he is strong. He stole the sugar yesterday from Mai Kâli's very lap. Lo! even the monkeys know that offerings should be left at Shiv-jee's feet!'

He spoke at a group of villagers who, in tow of a rival priest, were taking their offerings to the further temple.

John Ellison laughed.

'"'Ow 'appy could I be with either,"'

he chanted. 'W'ot! Ain't Shiver and Kâli settled that "*biz*" yet? W'y don't they get a divorce for bigamy both sides? Not as I care a d—n,'—he went on in his vile lingo in which all was English save the nouns and verbs, the latter having but one tense—the imperative. 'Siree 'Oneyman's my fancy. He as 'its 'im 'its me, Jân-Ali-shân. An' let me tell you that ain't no '*arnsiki bat*.[1] It's *zulm* an' *ficker* an' *burra burra affut*!'

These astounding equivalents for tyranny, trouble, and great misfortune, he used with intent; for he liked to trade on his reputation as a bird of ill-omen. 'Meanwhile,' he con-

[1] *Hansi-ki-bat*, lit. smiling word.

tinued, chucking a *pice* to the *pujâri* with that extreme affability which made even the most alarmed exclude him, personally, from any share in the coming evil, 'seeing as I was branded A1 as a babby I won't trouble you agin, sonny; but there's your fee all the same. So now for Siree 'Oneyman!'

He drew out a paper of sugar drops as he spoke, and, scattering some on the steps, began to sing

'Click, click!
Like a monkey on a stick.'

The effect was magical. Every leaf of the *pipals* rustled as the monkeys, recognising his call, swung themselves downward from branch to branch.

The bathers paused, full of smiles for this common interest shown by one of the aliens who are so often far beyond their simplicity.

Even Chris could not help a smile, despite the anxiety he was in, as he watched the monkeys close in on the sugar drops, quarrelling, pouching, reaching round with all four paws: with the exception of one monkey, a very large male, which, coming lamentably last, only used three; the fourth, meanwhile, clutching convulsively at its stomach.

'W'y, 'Oneyman?' came John Ellison's mellow voice, full of sympathy, 'w'ot's up, sonny? Got the cramps?—ate somethin' yer don't like?'—he paused, stared—'W'y! w'otever——' he paused again, and out of the fulness of his bewilderment wandered off helplessly into—

'She wore a wreath of roses.'

But poor Chris, far off as he was, had grasped the truth and turned hot and cold, long before Jân-Ali-shân said in an awed whisper—

'Wherever in the nation *did* 'ole 'Oneyman raise them dress bags?' He turned to the bystanders appealingly as he spoke, but their faces, as they gathered round in a circle, echoed his own surprise.

'Well, I am dashed!' he said softly; 'this beats cock-fightin'.'

It did, for Sri Hunumân having by this time grasped the fact that dignity was incompatible with dinner, had thrown the former aside, and having rolled the trousers hastily into a ball, had sat down on it, as on a cushion, while he reached

round for sugar drops with both paws. Whereupon the original thief, thinking he saw an opportunity, made a snatch at the braces, which still streamed over the steps. To no purpose, however, since 'Oneyman only clapped both paws behind, and, the cushion still *in situ*, hopped to another place.

A roar of amusement echoed out over the steps, and half-a-dozen youngsters, fired with ambition, tried the same game; also without success. Sri Honeyman eluded every clutch, even the despairing one which Chris, muffled to the eyes in his ascetic's shawl, laid on those streaming braces. They came off in his hands to the crowd's huge delight.

'*Ari*, brother, thou hast the tail anyhow!' said some in congratulation, but poor Chris cursed inwardly. What were braces without the trousers to wear with them?

John Ellison, meanwhile, half choked with laughter, and drunk with mirth, was rolling about, kicking legs and arms, and shouting, 'Go it, 'Oneyman! Go it, sonny!' until from some of the disappointed came the murmur that Jân-Ali-shân had better try and get the trousers himself, though all Mai Kâli's priests with sticks and staves had not been equal to making the old monkey give up the sugar! On this he rose breathlessly and looked round.

'You bet,' he said, 'it's Rule Britannier, that's w'ot it is.' Whereupon he took another paper bag of sugar drops from his pocket and walked up to the culprit.

'*Shab-bash!* 'Oneyman,' he said, with his usual affability, 'you done that uncommon well. If ever you're in want of the shiny, they'd give you a fiver for that interlood at a music 'all. But time's up, sonny. Your turn's over. So just you change bags like a good boy or——' The rest of the sentence was a melodious whistling of

'Britons never, never will be slaves,'

a dexterous emptying of the bribe, and an equally dexterous clutch at the trousers, accompanied by a forcible kick behind. The three combined were instantly successful, and there was Jân-Ali-shân carefully dusting his new possession. Then he held them up, and said suavely—

'Fair exchange ain't no robbery; but if any gent owns these pants, let 'im utter'—which remark he translated in hideous Hindustani into '*Koi admi upna breeches hai, bolo!*'

For one short second Chris felt inclined to brave the

situation. Then, as usual, he hesitated; so the moment of salvation passed. John Ellison rolled up his prize, put them under his arm, and with a general '*Ram-ram*' to the bystanders, and an affectionate wave of the hand to old 'Oneyman, walked off cheerily whistling,

'This is no my plaid, my plaid, my plaid.'

Chris looked after him helplessly, then went back to his tree hopelessly. He could not return home, by broad daylight, in any possible permutation or combination of a swallow-tailed coat and a devotee's *dhoti*. The only thing to be done was to wait for kindly concealing night.

Being Sunday, he would not be missed till noon, for his wife was a late riser. Even then she would not be alarmed; indeed, he had often stayed out all day without her taking the trouble to ask where he had been. That thought decided him to stay where and as he was. Besides, despite the shameful absurdity of the cause, the result was, in a way, pleasant. It was something to be *sent* back without responsibility to the old life even for a few hours, and a spirit of adventure woke in him as he remembered the things possible to one of his caste. Any one, for instance, would feed a Brahmin; and so, after secreting the remainder of his clothes beyond the reach of monkeys under a heap of the ruined wall, until he found an opportunity of removing them altogether, he set off boldly to beg breakfast in the city. The sun, now high in the heavens, smote on his bare limbs—so long unaccustomed to the warm stimulating caress—with all the intoxication of a new physical pleasure. But there was another touch, still more stimulating, which came to him first in a narrow side street close to the city gate; a street all sun and shade in bars, with women's chatter, women's laughter echoing from within the courtyard doors. Doors all closed saved this, the first, which had opened at his cry for alms, to let a woman's hand slip through. That reverent touch on his palm, so soft, so kind; that glimpse of a full petticoat, a jewel-covered throat, made his brain reel with recollection, his heart leap with the possibilities it suggested. How many years was it since he had seen a Brahmin woman worshipping her husband? That had been his mother, and he might have had such a wife as she had been to his father, if he had chosen; almost, if he chose.

He lay down deliberately to sleep, feeling even this—this possibility of going to bed without one—to be a relief after all the paraphernalia of pillows, mattresses, blankets, and sheets. When he woke, the sun had begun to sink, and the stream of worship was setting templewards again. But the crowd was a different one; more temporal, less spiritual. More eager for gossip, less concerned with salvation; and Chris, who had gained confidence in his disguise by this time, left the shadow of the trees in order to listen to the talk. Even to such as these it was an opportunity of gauging the mind of the multitude, which did not often present itself; and, being refreshed by his long sleep, he saw clearly that he, personally, might find this a useful experience.

The wildness of the rumours current, however, the absurdity of the beliefs he heard put forward, were beyond his patience, and more than once he drew down an unwelcome interest in himself by his flat denials.

His disguise, however—if it could be called a disguise seeing that he was, indeed, what he professed to be—held out, and so, by degrees, he grew bolder; telling himself that the day would not be lost if he could begin to practise what he had preached in Shark Lane, and raise his voice for the truth's sake.

It was not, however, till the first twinkling lights of the evening service showed in the temples, and the red and green signals on the railway bridge answered the challenge, that he found himself in the position he had advocated; that is one in opposition to many.

He did not shrink from the situation when it came; he had too much grit for that.

'It is a lie,' he reasserted, and turning to the larger crowd beyond the listening few, raised his voice.

'Listen, friends, and I will tell you why it is not true that this golden paper fell from Heaven into Kâli's temple. Why, her priests lie when they say it did. Listen, for I am Brahmin. I know the gods and their ways, and I know the *Huzoors* and their ways also.'

'Who is the lad? he speaks well,' passed in murmurs among the crowd which closed in to see and hear better. Chris pulled himself together as he stood, his figure showing clear against the light that lingered on the river.

'Who am I?' he echoed. 'Listen, and I will tell you; I am twice born, regenerate—a Brahmin of the Brahmins.'

The suggestion repelled yet attracted him, and, after a time, half in curiosity, half in affection, he turned his steps to the well-remembered alley where his mother still lived. He had been to see her, of course, when he first returned to India, but inevitably as an alien; and after his refusal to do penance, he had not gone at all. She had, in fact, refused to receive him. So his heart beat as he stood muffled in his devotee's drapery before the door, through which he had so often passed to worship clinging to her skirts, and gave his beggar's cry—

'*Alakh!* for Shiv's sake.'

There was no need to repeat it; for this was a pious house. The low door opened wide, and a young girl held out an alms with the mechanical precision of practice.

'For Shiv's sake,' she echoed monotonously, 'and for the sake of a son who has wandered from the true fold.'

Her voice held no trace of feeling, but Chris fell back with a stifled cry. For he knew what the words meant; knew that he was the wanderer.

So, for a second, the girl stood surprised, hesitating. She was extraordinarily beautiful. A slender slip of a girl about fourteen, with a long round throat poising the delicate oval of her face, and black lashes sweeping to meet the bar of her brows above her soft velvety eyes. There was a likeness still to the little orphan cousin who had come to make one more mouth to feed in the patriarchal household when he was a big boy just keen for college: the girl-child over whom his mother had smiled mysteriously, and talked of the years to come when the head of the house would have had his fill of education for his boy, and permit marriage. Yes, this was she, his cousin, little Naraini.

'There is naught amiss, my lord,' she said suddenly, drawing back in her turn with an offended air. 'I too am Brahmin, my hand is pure.'

So, indignantly, she dropped her alms of parched wheat into the gutter, and slammed the door.

Chris, down on his knees, his blood on fire, picked every grain up, and then, his head in a greater whirl than ever, made his way back to the river steps, to his hidden clothes, to the last hold he had on Western life and thought.

The steps were almost deserted in the noontide; therefore, wearied out with his vigil of the night and the excitement of the

day, he lay down deliberately to sleep, feeling even this—this possibility of going to bed without one—to be a relief after all the paraphernalia of pillows, mattresses, blankets, and sheets.

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There was sudden stir in the crowd, a murmur, 'Let her pass—she knows.' And then in that clear space where he stood, a woman stood also; a Hindoo widow, with bare arm uplifted from her white shroud.

'Lie not, Krishn Davenund!' she said. 'Thou art outcast, accursed! I, thy mother, say it.' The face, clear cut, pale with continued fasting, showed no pain, no regret, only stern reproof. 'Thou art not twice-born now. Oh! son of my desolation,' she went on, her voice shrilling as she spoke, 'thou art twice-dead. Go back to thy new ways, to thy new wife!'

A sudden stretch of her hand towards the scarlet-clad young girl, shrinking by her side, told its tale of something more bitter than bigotry; of a mother's jealousy.

Chris, who had fallen back from that unexpected betrayal, gave a hasty glance round, and what he saw in the faces of the crowd made him realise his position.

'Hush, mother!' he began; but it was too late.

Her story was well known among the priests. They were in arms at once, and, ere a minute passed, Chris found himself at bay, ankle deep in the water into which he had been driven, his back against the sacred temple of Viseshwar: so adding to his crime by its defilement.

'Listen!' he called.

But the crowd were already past that, and the cries 'He is a spy!' 'He hath defiled us!' 'Whom hath he not touched?' 'He hath been here all day!' 'He is sent to make us Christians!' rose on all sides.

Chris, his back to the temple, set his teeth. Beyond the crowd, that was kept at a yard's distance yet by something in his face, he could see two women, scarlet and white robed, sobbing in each other's arms, and the sight made him savage for their pain.

'How can I defile you?' he cried; 'I am Brahmin. Yonder is my mother. My father all know. Who dares to take my birthright from me?'

'Who? thyself!' came viciously from the foremost row of priests. 'Where is thy sacred thread, apostate?'

Chris flinched for the first time. It was true. In a fit of anger when his own received him not, he had removed the badge of the twice-born with his own hands. So he had nothing to which he could appeal. Nothing old or new!

'Listen!' he began again helplessly, and the crowd feeling the helplessness surged closer.

'Kill him!' said one voice, dominating the others by the very simplicity of its advice. 'He is nothing. He is not of us, nor of the *Huzoors*. Who wants him?'

Another instant and the advice might have been followed had not some one claimed poor Chris—had not a voice from behind said softly—

'Well! I'm dashed if it ain't the guv'nor! Now then! you niggers!'

The next instant, with a plentiful if quite good-natured use of heels and elbows, Chris Davenant's foreman of works was through the crowd into the water, and so, facing round on those threatening faces, was backing towards Chris, and making furious feints with his fists the while.

'*Ram-ram*, gents,' he said affably. 'Now, w'ot you 've got to do is to tell me w'ot all this is about. W'ot are you doin' to my guv'nor? Don't you speak, sir!' he added in a hasty whisper. 'I don't really want to know nothing. You and me's got to get out o' this galley, thet's all. An' if we don't,' he continued philosophically, 'you 'll 'ave to explain up top, and I kin listen then. Them kind o' words ain't no use down 'ere. Lem'me speak mine!'

With that he ceased sparring, walked two paces forwards in the water, put his hands in his trousers-pockets, and began on his lingo coolly—

'*Dekko* (look here), you want this *âdmi* (man) *abhi* (now), but you ain't goin' to get 'im. *Tumhâra nahin* (not yours). He's mine, *mera âdmi* (my man), *sumjha*? (do you understand?) If you want *lurro* (fight), come on. You shall 'ave a bellyful, an' there 'll be a plenty on you to *phânsi* (hang). But w'ot I say is, don't be *pârgul soors* (foolish pigs). I don't do your bally 'ole temples any 'arm. It's "*durm shaster ram-ram*[1] an' *hurry gunga*," so far's I care. But this man's my guv'nor. You don't touch 'im. *Kubhi nahin* (never). I'm a *nek âdmi, burra usseel* (virtuous man, very gentle) w'en I'm took the right way; contrariwise I'm *zulm* an' *ficker* an' *burra burra affut*. Now you ask ole 'Oneyman if I ain't. 'E knows both sides o' Jân-Ali-shân, and 'e 'll give 'is opinion, like the genl'eman 'e is.'

He paused, for an idea, a chance had suggested itself.

[1] The true faith.

Then at the top of his voice, with a devil-may-care lilt in it, he began—

'Click, click!
Like a monkey on a stick.'

The answer followed in a second. With rustlings and boundings the monkeys came to the rescue of the familiar voice; for the crowd behind, weary of being unable to see what was passing in front, turned instinctively to the new interest, and so, losing cohesion, the multitude lost unity of purpose also for the moment.

'Now's your time, sir,' shouted John Ellison; 'keep close to me!' Then with a wild yell of

'Clear the decks, comrades,'

he rushed head down at the fat stomach of the chief priest, bowled him over, and treating the rest as he would have treated a crush at football, found himself, with Chris at his heels, on the top of the steps almost before the crowd had realised what was happening.

'Pull up, sir,' he said, pausing breathlessly; 'never run a hinch more nor you can 'elp with niggers. An' they'll be all right now we're off them steps. I know 'em! As peaceable a lot as ever lived, if you don't touch their wimmin or their gods.'

And with that he turned to the peaceable lot with his usual urbanity.

'*Ram-ram*, gents. I done you no 'arm, and you done me no 'arm. That's as it should be. So good afternoon. *Salaam alackoom!*—Now then, sir, you come along to my diggin's an' get your pants.'

But as they hurried off to the Strangers' Home, he shook his head gravely.

'If it hadn't bin for my bein' in a surplus chore seven year, and so knowin'

"Lord a' mercy"

to the Ten Commandments, and my dooty to my neighbour, you'd never a wore breeches agin, sir, for I wouldn't never 'ave come back to them steps with a prick in my conshinse, sir, for fear as there was more in them dress pants than meets the eye, as the sayin' is; though why the nation, savin' your presence, sir, you come to took 'em off, beats me!'

Chris told him. Told him the whole story, as he might not, perhaps, have told a better man, and John Ellison listened decorously, respectfully. It was not till Chris, attired in the fateful garments, with his subordinate's white uniform coat superadded and the devotee's shawl twined as a turban (since it had not been deemed feasible to recover the rest of the dress-suit that night), was ready to return to civilisation, that John Ellison ventured on a parting remark.

'It's the onsartainty, sir, that does the mischief. Beer's beer, an' whisky's whisky. It's when you come to mixin' 'em that you dun'no where you are. It taste beastly to begin with, and then it don't make a chap, so to speak, punctooal drunk. So it throws 'im out o' reckonin', and makes 'im onsartin—an' that don't work in

"Hinjia's coral strand."'

CHAPTER IX

UNCERTAINTIES

THERE were many people in many parts of Nushapore that Sunday evening who were echoing Jân-Ali-shân's estimate of the danger and discomforts of uncertainty,

For, far and near, from Government House, where Grace Arbuthnot sate at the head of a glittering dinner-table round which half the empire-making bureaucracy of the province was gathered, to the veriest hovel on the outcast outskirts of the city, where two women—the lowest of the low—were grinding at the mill for their daily bread such sweepings of the corn-dealers' shops as they had been able to gather during the day, the feeling that none knew what the coming dawn might bring to hovel and house, home and country, and people, lay heavily, almost suffocatingly.

It is a feeling which comes to India, none can tell how, or why. It is in the air like plague and pestilence. There is no remedy for it, and the fact that we aliens have learnt to recognise its existence is often the only difference between the vague unrest which dies away, as it came, irrationally, and that which brought us the mutiny, and which may, conceivably, bring us one again.

There is only one thing certain about this feeling. Whatever passion, or injustice, or ignorance, causes the first quickened heart-beat, it is not long before, however obscurely, the great problem of sex becomes involved in the quarrel between East and West. For there lies the *crux* of toleration, of loyalty.

So, with plague and its inevitable interference with domestic life looming before them, the hard-worked officials who for six days of the week had borne the heaviest burden men can bear—absolute executive responsibility, when the executive authority is limited—knew perfectly well, as they

deliberately tried to forget that burden round the dinner-table at Government House, that very little would suffice to upset that unstable equilibrium of law and order, which—taken in conjunction with the peaceful, law-abiding temperament of the people—is so remarkable in India.

And there was so much that might conceivably upset it. To begin with, the tape machine under lock and key in the private secretary's office next the dining-room! At any moment, in the middle of a jest, or a *pâté de foie gras*, its electric bell might begin to ring, and the verdict of British ignorance, embodied in a message from a Secretary of State, print itself out in obliteration of the verdict of practical experience. For telegrams had been coming fast and frequent of late; would inevitably come faster and more frequent every year, every month, every day, as the lessening length of time between India and England made the pulse-beats of either audible to the other.

Then, every one round the table knew that those days, those hours were, also inevitably, bringing nearer and nearer that quarrel as to whether cleanliness comes next to godliness, or godliness to cleanliness, which has yet to be settled between East and West. Between a race which prides itself on asserting the former in its proverb, yet in its practice insists on sanitation and leaves salvation to take its chance; and a race which, while asserting that salvation is impossible without physical purity, practically ignores cleanliness. A quarrel which is surely the quaintest dissociation of theory and practice which the world can show! All the quainter in that the Western proverb is a quotation from the sacred wisdom of the East.

The question therefore, 'When will the plague come?' with its corollary, 'If it comes, what shall we do?' underlay the laughter of two-thirds of the guests. For they were men. The remaining third, being women, were as yet unconcerned; the danger had not yet come within their horizon of personal good or evil. All except Grace Arbuthnot; and that it had come into hers was due simply to an enlargement of that personal horizon; not from any general sense of duty.

Yet, in a way, the men also limited their wonder to their own line of work. The city magistrate with reference to the back slums of Nushapore, peopled by the idlest, most

dissolute, most depraved population in India. The Inspector-General of Hospitals thought of his native doctors, his dispensaries. The police-officer of his bad-character list, his licences to carry arms. The General-in-command of the station, again, thought of his garrison, of the four hundred sick in hospital out of eighteen hundred men, who might be wanted ere long. His were not pleasant thoughts, and they were urgent. Only that morning he had driven down from cantonments to catch the Lieutenant-Governor before he went to church and discuss the doctor's fiat that nothing short of a complete change, a complete severance from the bazaars which, crowding round the barracks, placed the troops, as it were, in the midst of a native town, was likely to do any good. So they had discussed the question during service hours, while others were saying 'Good Lord, deliver us' from a variety of evils; with the result that Sir George had promised to go down to cantonments the very next day, and see for himself what the state of affairs was.

Yet, despite the fact that all the repressed anxiety present centred round the one word 'plague,' the first hint of the subject mooted gravely, brought instant protest from a high-pitched Irish brogue.

'Oh, plague take it altogether! for it is becoming a bore of the fullest dimensions! But I hearrd a fine story about it an' old Martineau yesterday. There has been a suspected case in one of his districts. An old Mohammedan woman, travelling alone in a country gig, died; and the deputy-collector—a Hindoo hungering for promotion—thought he 'ud curry favour with the powers by bein' prompt. So he burrnt the cart an' the clothes an' the corpse. They didn't mind the corpse—bein' a woman—though it's perdition, me dear Mrs. Carruthers, for a Mohammedan to be burrnt; but the clothes were another story, and the relatives kicked up a bit of a fuss. So Martineau had to hold an inquiry. "Did you burrn the corpse?" he roared—ye know his sucking-dove of a voice. "Sir," says the deputy half blue-funk, half-elation at his own action, "I did; the rules provide——" "I didn't ask for the rules, sir," roars Martineau; "did you burrn the clothes?" "*Huzoor!*" bleats the *baboo*, forgetting his English, "it is laid down." "I didn't ask what's laid down," comes the roar; "did you burrn the cart?" "*Ghereeb-na-wâz*," blubbers the deputy, "I thought——" "Confound you, sir!

I didn't ask what you thought; did you burrn the driver?" "No! no!" shrieked the wretched creature, fallin' on his knees. "It is a lie! It is malice! It is an invention of my enemies. I didn't." "Then, sir," thunders Martineau, "you're a d—d fool, sir, not to have stopped his mouth."'

There was a light-hearted laugh round the table which, for the time being, focussed all the qualities which go to make empire; not the least of which is the faculty for such laughter. Laughter which comes to the West, sometimes, to be celebrated in song and story, like that of the ball before Waterloo, or of the French *noblesse* in the *conciergerie*, but which is ever present in India, giving to its Anglo-Indian society an almost wistful frivolity, studious in its gay refusal to take anything *aux grands sérieux* till the stern necessity of doing so stares it in the face.

And, with the laugh, the grave, white-coated, dark-faced servants passed round the table also, ignoring the mirth, ignoring all things save French dishes and iced champagne.

'Lucky it was a woman, wasn't it!' said a voice. 'If it had been a man, there would have been real trouble.'

'How rude! Isn't it at least as bad for a woman to be burnt,' challenged a very pretty one, 'as a man?'

'For the woman, no doubt,' replied the brogue drily; 'but in this case the men don't care. Ye see, the Mohammedan paradise is already peopled with *houris* like yourself, me dear Mrs. Carruthers; so the presence of the sex isn't important enough to fuss about.'

'Of course not!' retorted the little lady gaily, 'because you men know we can always make a Paradise for ourselves.'

'Make; an' mar, me dear madam!'

'Oh! I give you Eve! The woman who is fool enough to think she can keep her husband in one if she gives him a cold lunch of apples, deserves to lose everything.'

'Except her looks! The world can't spare the pretty women!'

So far the lightness of both voices had been charming; but a new one coming from the other side of the table had the heavy acidity in it of wine that should sparkle and does not; for the owner being Mrs. Carruthers's recognised rival, sinned against the first principles of *badinage* by importing spite into it.

'Surely that's been said before. Every one knows cooks are the devil; mine is, anyhow!'

'The devil!' echoed little Mrs. Carruthers, eyeing her adversary—whose bad dinners were a byword—with a charming surprise; 'I wonder at *your* saying so. Why, the devil tempts you, and you do eat; and—and *some* cooks disgust you, and you don't!'

Her antagonist's protest that the quotation applied to Eve, was lost in the laugh, during which Jack Raymond—who had found it impossible to evade Sir George Arbuthnot's conscientious gratitude for Jerry's rescue as embodied in an invitation to dinner—said to his neighbour—

'You think, Miss Drummond, that we Anglo-Indians talk a lot of rubbish.'

He, himself, had given her small opportunity of judging, for he had been very silent all through the meal; in fact, a trifle sulky. Why, he could not decide, and it had annoyed him that he should be conscious at once of resentment and relief at the etiquette of precedence which sent the secretary to the club so far from the beautiful face at the head of the table. And Lesley, for her part, after the manner of modern girls, had accepted his silence calmly, not troubling herself to amuse one who did not trouble to amuse her; so she had eaten her dinner peacefully, without any reference to her neighbour.

He, however, had been unable to attain this philosophic standard. This indifference of the independent girl of the world, who, conscious of an assured position even as an unmarried woman, treats man as an unnecessary, if, on the whole a not unpleasant adjunct to a life that is complete without him, was quite new to Jack Raymond, who had not been home for fourteen years. He admired it frankly; felt that it suited her, suited the refined curve of the long throat, the faint droop at the corners of the mouth, the smooth coils of hair. The chill dignity of it all, he realised—for he was a quick judge in such matters—did not mean anything personal. It was not *he* with whom, as he phrased it, she desired to have no truck, but with the whole creation of such as he; or such, rather, as she chose to consider him. For it was evident that, despite her almost magisterial calm, she still used the woman's privilege of making her own heroes and villains. In reality, she could know nothing about him!

Should he tell her something? The question had occurred to him, and had found answer in his remark.

She answered the challenge with a half-bored smile.

'I suppose you like it; but it does seem odd to an outsider in what is virtually a picked society. And then there is so much to talk about seriously in India.'

'We prefer to think about serious things,' he replied coolly. 'I'll bet you—shall we say your namesake's odds—twenty to one?—that the men round this table do better work for not wasting time in—in *talkee-talkee*.'

'I don't bet,' she said, too disdainful for wider notice of his words.

'So I am aware,' he answered quietly, 'and that reminds me! The five thousand rupees I won off Bonnie Lesley still awaits your instructions.'

'Mine!' she echoed in surprise. 'Why?'

'As to what charity is to profit by my sin. There is one for the regeneration of European reprobates—more commonly called the loafers' fund, Miss Drummond, which, under the circumstances, might suit.'

She looked icebergs. 'Thanks, Mr. Raymond; but your eloquence succeeded so absolutely in convincing me I was in no way responsible, that I must decline to interfere. Please do as you choose with your ill-gotten gains.'

He smiled. 'Then the money, being in thousand-rupee notes, shall stay where it is—in my pocket-book. It gives a gambler confidence to know he has some spare cash about him! Besides,' he added hastily, a sudden shrinking in her eyes warning him that he had really pained her, 'it might come in for a good deed.'

'Possibly, not probably,' she began, then explained herself hastily: 'I mean, of course, it is not likely such an occasion will arise——'

'Don't, Miss Drummond,' he interrupted gravely. 'Keep your bad opinion of me undiluted; you can't go wrong there. But don't condemn the lot of us for talking rubbish; there is generally a reason for it.'

'There is generally a reason for most things, I believe,' she said coldly.

Her tone nettled him, and as usual when his temper rose, he went straight to the point.

'Generally,' he admitted; 'but I don't think you allow for

these. That lady opposite, for instance, is talking nonsense, all she knows, in order to forget that she sang the hymn for those at sea to-day. The *padre* had it because his wife and daughter are on their way out, and a bad cyclone was telegraphed yesterday off Socotra. Her only son is in the same boat. Then the man next her,' he went on, for Lesley was listening with faintly startled, faintly distasteful curiosity, 'is trying to forget that the doctors tell him it is a toss up whether he can pull through the next hot weather without leave. He can't afford to take any, with four boys at school and one at the university. Luckily, if he doesn't pull through, his wife—she has been bossing the show at home these five years because the rupees wouldn't run two establishments—will be better off than if he did. Pensions of a hundred, and a hundred and fifty, mount up, you see, when there 's ten of a family. Then the pretty woman flirting with the general is trying to forget there is such a thing as a child in the world. She left four at home because they telegraphed that her husband wasn't safe alone. He was in an out-station, and took a double-barrelled gun to shoot locusts. So he said, but his bearer wetted the cartridges, and sent a camel *sowar* to headquarters for the doctor! He has still to use a hair restorer you'll observe—that 's the man over there. Look how he 's watching his wife! He has to take her back to the wilderness to-morrow, and I shouldn't wonder if he wasn't thinking himself a fool not to have made sure, for her sake, that his powder was dry! Brain fever plays tricks with a man's reasoning powers, Miss Drummond.'

Lesley's lip curled slightly with the indifferent distaste so many girls have nowadays, for the least sentimentality, the faintest claim on emotion.

'Is it *all* tragedy?' she began critically.

'All!' he interrupted her cheerfully. 'Even Mrs. Carruthers has one. They fumigated her last Paris frock at the quarantine station, and took the colour out of it! But that 's enough. I don't want to have to find a reason for the nonsense that is in *me*. Are you going to the Artillery sports to-morrow?'

She gave no answer, but she sat looking at him with an appreciative smile. 'You do it very well, though——' she said, then paused. 'I wonder why you gave up the civil service? Lady Arbuthnot told me you did, but she

didn't say why. I expect you lost your temper, didn't you?'

It was exactly what he had done, but the only person who had ever told him so before had been Grace Arbuthnot. And she had made it a personal matter; her eyes had given and claimed so much when she told him; while the ones opposite him, now, were absolutely self-absorbed.

'Possibly,' he admitted curtly, nettled by her cool curiosity. 'You can judge for yourself. There was a row in the native city of which I had charge. I fired on the mob. Government thought it was unnecessary, and stopped my promotion. I resigned.'

'And the row?' she asked quickly.

'That stopped also, of course. Excuse me, but Lady Arbuthnot has made the move.'

Lesley stood up, tall, slender, almost conventual in her clinging white dress, in the reserved yet absolutely self-reliant look on her face. But she paused, ere leaving him, to say judicially—

'Then that proves that you were right to fire; and if you were in the right, as you were, when——?'

'Are you not coming, Lesley? You can finish your discussion afterwards,' came Lady Arbuthnot's voice in a half-playful, half-impatient appeal, as she stopped beside them to include the girl in the contingent she was marshalling towards the door. The servants had gone. From one end to the other of the big room there was no hint or sign of the east. It might have been a London dinner-party. Grace herself, in her pale green draperies and flashing diamonds, might have been the London hostess whose only care was to get rid of her guests gracefully and so find freedom to be one herself, elsewhere.

'It is my fault,' put in Jack Raymond quickly. 'It is so seldom any one tells me I do right, that I must be excused for delaying a young lady who is kind enough to perjure herself to say so.'

'I didn't perjure myself,' said Lesley, with a frown. 'I don't as a rule. I really think you were right.'

He knew, absolutely, that her praise was—as her blame had been—quite impersonal, that he was forgotten in her sense of abstract justice and injustice, but he appropriated the commendation with a bow, because he felt that to do

so was a challenge to both the women before him; to Grace, of the older type, with her cult of sentiment deliberately overlaying her intellect, and Lesley, of the newer type, with her dislike to sentimentality as deliberately overlaying her heart. He felt, with a certain irritation, that there ought to be some middle standpoint, as he said—

'Thank you, Miss Drummond!'

Lady Arbuthnot recognised the personal challenge instantly.

'What was the virtue, Lesley?' she asked proudly.

'Only firing on a mob,' he answered for the girl. 'It is lucky, Lady Arbuthnot, that I have no chance of doing so again, or the consequences of Miss Drummond's approval might be more disastrous than that of other people's blame.'

The sense of something uncomprehended, coming to Lesley uncomfortably, as it always comes, made her forbear to squash the maker of the bow, and say hastily in half-unconscious effort after the purely commonplace—

'Then I hope there won't be a chance; but one can never tell, can one?'

She blushed at her own inane words when she heard them, but Grace Arbuthnot as she moved on, gave a little hard laugh. 'Never, my dear! So long as there are men and women in the world, it will be as Stephen Hargraves said, "all a muddle."'

She broke off abruptly to look round; for, through the closed doors of the secretary's room came the imperative ring of an electric bell, making more than one keen face follow her example. But at the open door where the private secretary was holding up the *portière* on one side, while Nevill Lloyd as A.D.C. held up the other, the former shrugged his shoulders.

'Bother that bell!' he said to little Mrs. Carruthers who was passing. 'There's my evening gone! They might spare us Sunday—especially when *you* are dining here. I've a great mind to keep them ringing till you've gone.'

'Don't,' she laughed. 'Supposing it were a mutiny!' She made the suggestion out of pure wickedness, because her rival, who owned to never sleeping a wink if the bazaar near her house was noisy and let off fireworks, was within hearing.

'Surely you don't think'—began the timorous lady.

'Certainly not,' consoled the secretary. 'And if it was, Mrs. Carruthers, that's no reason for breaking the Sabbath.'

'They don't,' retorted the gay little lady. 'Sunday is over with them ages ago. They are six hours before——'

'Behind, you mean! The West is absolutely, hopelessly behind.'

Mrs. Carruthers nodded airily. 'How do you know? you never can be certain, can you? which is before and which is behind in a circle! It all depends on where *you* are.'

With which piece of wisdom, the last Paris frock but one trailed off into the drawing-room, and deposited itself comfortably and becomingly by the side of a dowdy black one, for the sake of contrast and monopoly, by-and-by, when the men should return to their allegiance.

They lingered over their wine, however, that evening. So long that Grace Arbuthnot grew pale over the strain of waiting to know what that electric bell had meant. She was given to worrying herself quite needlessly. Lesley under similar conditions would have taken the situation in more manly fashion, but then she was far more assured of her position, curiously enough, than Grace Arbuthnot was of hers. For the simple reason that the latter had won it, in her generation, by her personal and exceptional capability, while Lesley took hers by right of the ordinary woman's new claim to be heard as well as seen.

And then Grace Arbuthnot was at another disadvantage. Her sentiment was a heavier weight to carry than Lesley's lack of it; and Jack Raymond's words had set her nerves jarring. So, at last, on the mother's excuse of going to see if Jerry were comfortably asleep, she left the drawing-room, and on her way upstairs, paused to listen at the dining-room door. As she stood there in her diamonds, her sea-green garments, trying to catch anything definite in the muffled voices within, she felt a sudden vast impatience at her sex; felt, as Lesley would not have felt, that it was a disadvantage. For the old revolt of womanhood used to be against nature; now it is against the custom which shackles nature.

As she passed on up the wide stairs, the strange silence and solitude of an Indian house in which all service comes from outside, lay about her; but in Jerry's room the open window let in a sound. The most restless sound in the world, the rhythmic yet hurried beat of the little hour-glass drum used by the natives in their amusements. Rhythmic yet hurried, like the quickened throb of a heart. It came

faintly, indefinitely, from the distance and darkness of the city; but Grace had been too long in India not to be able to picture for herself the environment whence it rose. She could see the murk of smoke and shadow, the light of flicker and flare on the circling faces round the shrilling voice or posturing figure of a woman. Was it a wedding? Or was it—the other thing? It might be either; for that intermittent noise of fireworks, which echoed at intervals like the report of guns, belonged to both.

This time it was a fear of her own self that came to Grace Arbuthnot as she listened—a fear of her own sex—a fear of the hundreds of thousands of hearts beating away in the darkness around her; beating perhaps in rhythm to that restless sound.

And so little might bring the restlessness to a heart! Her own gave quick assent as she looked down on the sleeping childish face, seen dimly by the rushlight set on the floor beside the muffled, sleeping figure of the child's bearer.

For the sight brought back, in a second, that other sleeping face she had seen a few days before. Not that the two were outwardly alike; the likeness lay within. She took a step nearer, and then stood looking curiously, almost fearfully, at the child she had borne. She was one of the ninety and nine out of every hundred good women who pass through wifehood and motherhood thinking it their duty to ignore its problems—the problems which only good women can solve—and so it gave her a certain shock to realise that she had passed on that old love of hers to this child of another man. Yet, when one came to think of it, what else was heredity—if there was such a thing in the mind—but the passing on of one's admirations, one's ideals? The passing on from generation to generation of one's own affinity for good or evil; the slow evolution of the spirit of a race.

The spirit of a race! She stooped suddenly and kissed the little sleeping face. And the kiss had in it the thought of another sleeping face, and an almost fierce pride of possession. But the child's face frowned, and a little white nightgowned arm curved itself to shield the cheek from further caresses.

'Don't bov'ver, mum; I'm all 'wight,' came a sleepy protest.

Grace stood straight again, feeling baffled, helpless; for

that dislike to any display of affection had never been to her liking. It had been, in fact, partly responsible for her refusal to fulfil her engagement when Jack Raymond had lost his temper and threatened to throw up his career. She had dared him to do it, and, being high-spirited, he had done it. And then, with bitter regret, infinite pain, and a vast amount of conventional virtue, she had withdrawn her promise to marry him because—— —— ——?

For the first time in twelve years of steady conviction that she had done right, the suggestion that the only justification for such refusal must lie in the inability of one or the other to perform their part of the contract, and that that, again, must depend on what the contract of marriage is essentially, came to disturb her. But she turned from it impatiently, telling herself she was a fool, at three-and-thirty, to puzzle over past problems, when the present was full of them, and far more interesting ones.

Yet, as she went downstairs again, that insistent throbbing from the dark distant heart of the city seemed to go with her, rousing a perfect passion of reckless unrest in her own.

Was anything certain except present pleasure or pain? Was it worth while, even, to *be* certain? Was it not better to let that heart-throb quicken or slacken as it chose?

She felt her face pale, her eyes bright, as she re-entered the drawing-room, to see instantly, first of all, that Jack Raymond was talking to Lesley.

It required quite an effort for her to remember her real anxiety, and with a certain sense of duty seek out her husband, who was standing with the commissioner in a quiet corner.

'It was nothing serious, I hope, George,' she said.

He turned to her, perplexed but kindly.

'Serious, my dear? Oh! you mean the telegram. No! nothing really important, though they seem to think it so over there. They want me to promulgate some sort of official denial of there being any secret programme in the event of a plague outbreak. It is weak, of course—in a way, a mistake; but I don't think it will do actual harm—do you, Kenyon?'

The commissioner shrugged his shoulders. He was not in the secret; but had his suspicions. 'No, sir,' he replied; 'not unless there *was* one, and the fact were to leak out. It

is difficult to prevent this with native clerks, especially when the idea of it is present, as it certainly is——'

'But the reality isn't,' put in Sir George decisively, 'in spite of what that scurrilous fellow says to-day in the *Voice of India*.'

Grace caught in her breath sharply.

'What does it say?' she asked.

'Only that such a paper does exist, and that it can be produced—which is, of course, absurd——' His glance at his wife for the comprehension she alone could give made him pause. 'My dear,' he went on concernedly, 'how pale you are! There is really nothing to be anxious about—is there, Kenyon? For myself, I'm glad of the definite lead over. For one thing, it makes it feasible for us to do what the doctors have been urging on the General for some time back—send both regiments out to a health camp at Morâdki. They seem to have gone to bits altogether. Sullivan told me to-day he had forty-eight cases of enteric alone, and that he had never known the men so reckless and hard to manage—breaking out of hospital every night.'

'I wonder why?' began Lady Arbuthnot, when the commissioner interrupted her.

'Why, it's simplicity itself! Don't you know the story? Well, this is it. The first battalion of the —th Regiment here was under home orders from Burmah, and the men, of course, saved up every penny they could. At the last moment, however, the second battalion could only produce three hundred boys who could by any possibility pass muster as twenty-one, the age-limit for India. So the authorities wired out to draft every possible man from the first for an extra year's foreign service with the second battalion—virtually a strange regiment. The men drew out every halfpenny of their savings the day the order came, and have been spending it ever since—and teaching the three hundred boys to spend theirs too. It's the record of a big blunder.'

'Just so,' assented Sir George; 'but these mistakes will occur. It was unfortunate, however, that they sent the second battalion here; for the first was nearly decimated by cholera at Nushapore about three years ago. Sullivan says he thinks it is largely that. They hate the place, are in a bit of a funk about it; and when that is the case they will do anything for the sake of a distraction.'

Grace, listening, seemed to hear once more that restless throbbing in the air. She saw the murk of smoke and shadow, the light of flicker and flare, the shrilling voice, the posturing figure.

And the encircling faces?

She clasped her mother's hands tight, and thought of her own boy—of the spirit of the race.

CHAPTER X

THE SINEWS OF WAR

THERE was a strong smell of carbolic in Miss Leezie's house, for the bazaar on which it gave was being cleaned by half a dozen sweepers, a water-carrier, and the conservancy overseer in a uniform coat with a brass badge; his part being to dole out the disinfectant and survey the proceedings from various doorsteps in advance of the slimy black sludge, which was being propelled by the sweepers' brooms along the open gutters—those scientifically-sloped, saucer-shaped gutters that are the pride of every cantonment magistrate's heart.

The cleansing of them was scientific also; partly because the conservancy *darogha* knew that the Lieutenant-Governor was due in cantonments that afternoon; mostly, however, because that particular bazaar, being a favourite lounge for the dwellers in the barracks round the corner, the orders regarding its cleanliness were strict.

It was, therefore, as clean as it is possible to keep a road between two tight-packed rows of mud houses which are guiltless of any sanitary appliances, unlimited as to inmates, and from which all refuse has to find its way into the gutter; unless, as sometimes happens, the moving of it even thus far is considered too much trouble, and it is left to fester and rot in some dark corner within, until it betrays itself, and brings raids and fines upon the injured inhabitants.

Even so, there was filth and to spare for the brooms; filth that smelt horribly beneath its veneer of carbolic. More than once, indeed, the white-trousered legs belonging to the uniform coat and the badge had, when the wearer had forgotten sewage in a pull at some shopkeeper's pipe, to withdraw themselves hastily from the oncoming of a regular bore of unutterable muck, which came sweeping along like a tidal wave, overwhelming even scientific saucers.

It happened so at the aerated-water seller's, whose shop was beneath Miss Leezie's balconied apartments. It was an excellent position for the trade, and though he only charged *two pice* a bottle for soda and lemonade, he found no difficulty in paying a heavy licence for the privilege of selling Shahjeshanpore rum, potato brandy, and bad whisky, in addition to the waters.

But then he could make the latter for less than they could at the regimental factory, where they had to use filters, and satisfy the inspecting doctor that everything was according to rule and regulation; just as they had to satisfy him at the regimental dairies that the few drops of milk given to the soldier in barracks were as pure as care could make them.

The purity, of course, raised the price of milk to the authorities; but they did not grudge the expense to themselves in such a good cause. Besides, if the soldiers wanted more milk—and some of the boys fresh out from home were still young enough to prefer a tumbler of it to one of bad spirit and tepid soda—there was always plenty of the cheaper quality to be bought at the sweetmeat shops.

And of these, as well as of fruit shops and sherbet shops, there were many in the bazaar where Miss Leezie and her kind lodged in the upper stories; so that either above or below, the dwellers in the barracks round the corner could find enough to satisfy the appetite.

Therefore the smell of carbolic was conscientiously mingled with that of decaying melon rinds, sour milk, drains, and musk; and the outcome of the atmosphere was left to Providence.

The immediate result was not savoury; especially in the low stuffy room, as yet shut out from the light and air of the balcony by wadded *portières*, in which a woman, lounging in one corner, was idly allowing her fingers to flirt on the parchment of a drum—one of those small, quaint drums shaped like Time's hour-glass, which produce what Grace Arbuthnot had told herself was the most restless sound on God's earth.

It had the same passion of unrest, here in this squalid room, though it was scarcely loud enough to stir the air heavy with that horrible compound of smells.

The woman was Miss Leezie herself, as yet negligent in purely native *déshabillé*; for the afternoon was still young,

and she knew that custom would be late owing to the Artillery Sports. Indeed, she was going to them herself, by and by, with some of her apprentices, in a hired carriage. But she was not taking Sobrai; for Sobrai was wilful, oddly attractive withal, and therefore dangerous to the discipline of cantonments. With an evil tongue also, so that Miss Leezie looked over in lazy anger to the opposite corner of the room, whence a shrill assertion that the speaker would not be put upon had just risen.

'Then thou hadst best go back to the city and Dilarâm, fool!' said the mistress of the house sharply; 'for if thou stayest here, it must be to walk sober, as we all do, to the time of the fifes and drums. My house hath a good name, and I will not have it given an ill one for all the apprentices in Nushapore. So if thou wilt not obey, go! There be plenty of that sort, unlicensed, beyond the boundaries. But we are different; we are approved!'

She leant back with palpable pride against a wall which found its only purification from the rub of red coats, and that civilised flavouring of carbolic in the smell of drains and garbage.

Sobrai scowled sulkily. She had set her heart on going to the sports in a conglomerate attire of white flounced muslin, tight silk trousers, nose-ring and kid gloves; preferably on the roof of the hired green box on wheels within which Miss Leezie would sit in dignified state.

'I did not come hither to rot within four walls? I could have done that in the city,' she shrilled, louder still.

'Hold thy peace, idiot!' interrupted Miss Leezie, 'if thou dost dare to raise a commotion now, when at any moment the Lât-*sahib* himself may come driving past, 'twill be the worse for thee!'

'Wah! thou canst do nothing,' answered Sobrai; feeling cowed, despite the assertion, by Miss Leezie's tone.

'Nothing!' echoed the latter, with a hideous laugh. 'Nay, sister, such as thou art at the mercy of a whisper. I have but to make it, and out thou goest, neck and crop, to the sound of the fifes and drums. Nay, more'; she rose slowly, and with the hour-glass of bent wood and parchment in her hand crossed to stand in front of the sullen figure, and go on drumming softly in imitation of a march. Then after a glance at the other drowsy figures in the room, she leant down to the girl's

ear to repeat savagely—'Ay! and more. I can put thee in, as well as turn thee out. Put thee in the four walls of a real prison. Remember the stolen pearls, Sobrai!'

The girl laughed defiantly, cunningly. 'Lo! hast thou thought of *that* at last? but I am no fool, Leezie. I counted the cost ere I gave them in payment to thee. See you, *thy* blame for receiving them is as *mine* for taking them. That is the *sahib's* law. And then, who is to say they are stolen? Not Jehân. He would not own his loss, if the owning meant that the city should know one of his women, Sobrai Begum, princess, was in Miss Leezie's house. That would be dishonour, for all it hath such a good name!'

She essayed a giggle, but it failed before the coarse sensuous face, where the *blanc de perle* of full dress still lingered in almost awful contrast to the veil of Eastern modesty.

'Listen, fool!' replied the past mistress in the rules and regulations within which vice is safer than virtue. 'Listen, and quit striving. Thou art mine. Not only as those others,' she flirted her hand from the drum to the dozing girls, 'whom fear of the fife and drum keeps in my power. I would not have taken thee without other leading strings, knowing thee as I do—wilful, ay! and clever too, girl—with patience, sure to do well'—she threw this sop in carelessly.—'But I found the reins to my hand. Or ever I took thy pearls, I knew there were more than Jehân's amissing; for the police come ever to us first.'

'More than Jehân's?' echoed Sobrai stupidly. 'What then?'

'This,' whispered Miss Leezie fiercely. 'Those four paltry pearls shall not be Jehân's leavings on the carpet, but earnest for the whole string of the same set; mark you, the same set,' she laughed maliciously, 'which thou didst steal from the Lady-*sahib*. It is all in the power of the police, and they are my friends. So if thou dost so much as raise thy voice, I will raise mine.'

'From the Lady-*sahib*,' faltered Sobrai, aghast.

'Ay, from the Lady-*sahib*. Hark! that will be the Lât himself coming to satisfy himself all is as it should be. Shall I tell him now, when I make my *salaam* as is due, or wilt thou promise?'

She paused, her hand on the *portière*, ere going into the balcony, and waited for a sign of surrender from Sobrai.

'But it is not true'—protested the latter.

Miss Leezie laughed. 'As true as aught thou canst bring; since, as thou sayest, Jehân will not own up. Quick! shall I speak?'

Sobrai sate stunned, silent, then dropped her head between her knees.

So the *portière* slid sideways, letting in a shaft of sunlight, a stronger whiff of carbolic, and the rumble of a passing vehicle. But only for a second; for in the carriage which came rapidly down the swept and garnished bazaar, ablaze with sunlight, there were ladies, and Miss Leezie, therefore, drew back decorously; to continue gazing, however, through a side slit.

'He hath his *mems* with him,' she explained to the drowsy crew roused by the rumble. 'Two, and one is beautiful as a *houri*. But they wear no fringe. Is that to be "fassen," think you? 'Tis as well to be in it.'

And, as the carriage passed, the slit grew wider and wider as one pair after another of bold black eyes noted the lack of fringe in Grace Arbuthnot and Lesley Drummond, who were accompanying Sir George so far, on their way to be shown over one of the hospitals by the Head Sister; under whom, it so happened, Lesley had served when, after modern fashion, she had 'gone in for a year's nursing.'

'It is certainly most beautifully clean; it ought to be healthy enough,' was her remark now, as she drove past, ignorant not only of the eyes that were turning her into a fashion plate, but of everything in the environment.

'It couldn't well be cleaner,' assented Grace, with a faint reservation in her voice; but she, too, was unconscious of those watching eyes, those mimicking minds.

'Quite so,' admitted Sir George dubiously. 'Everything is done that can be done, of course; but it is uncommonly hard to make a bazaar healthy.'

He glanced back, as he spoke, at the balcony above the soda-water shop.

The children, little naked happy brown creatures, were playing in the sunshine. The shopkeepers stood up to *salaam*. An *ekka* load or two of soldiers in uniform, their legs dangling outwards on all sides, their red bodies jammed to shapelessness in the effort to find sitting room on the jimp seat till the whole looked like a huge toy crab on wheels,

rattled past towards the Artillery parade-ground, their songs and laughter audible above the rattle.

So, abruptly, the bazaar ended, and the cantonment church showed its spire above some stunted trees.

The sweepers, having finished the gutters by this time, were at work on the church compound clearing away the litter of yesterday's services; and they drew up in line, the *darogha* with his disinfectants at their head, to *salaam*, brooms in hand, as the carriage drove past.

Then suddenly, beyond the church, separated by it only from the bazaar, was the bareness of the barracks. A dozen or more of them set at different angles, long, low, all to pattern, absolutely indistinguishable from each other save by the big black number painted on the gable-ends. Desolate utterly, lacking for the most part any reason, whatever, why they should stand on that particular spot instead of upon another in the dry, bare, sun-scorched plots of ground intersected by dry, white, dusty roads. But two or three of them—those farthest away—apparently had a somewhat efficient one, for Sir George said, pointing them out—

'Those are the hospitals, over there, close to the cemetery. I'll drop you and go on to my committee. The carriage can return and take you on to the sports. I can walk—I mean if there is time after we 've settled things.'

The dubious tone was in his voice once more; perhaps the renewed smell of carbolic, mixed with iodoform, engendered doubt as to the efficacy of anything but heroic treatment.

The smell was strong in the comfortable little room where Grace and Lesley waited for Sister Mary, and it came in, still stronger, with the latter's workmanlike grey dress and scarlet facings.

'Dr. Sullivan is here, and can take you round at once, Lady Arbuthnot,' she said cheerfully; 'and then, if you will honour us, he will drive you over to our mess for tea before you go on to the sports.'

It was all so cut-and-dried, so commonplace, so, as it were, inevitable, so almost proper, to this kind-faced woman whose work it was; but the first glance into that unnaturally long, unnaturally bare, unnaturally clean room, with its windows set high, so that the twenty-four beds down one side and the twenty-four beds down the other side should be free of draught yet full of air, gave Grace Arbuthnot a sudden

almost resistless desire to call aloud, to clap her hands, to do something, anything, to drive the sight from her, to startle it into flight, to rouse herself from the nightmare of it.

'This is the enteric ward,' said Sister Mary in a matter-of-fact tone. 'All the beds are full to-day, and Dr. Sullivan —but he will tell you himself. There he is, coming from the officers' ward.'

'Have you many in there?' asked Lesley.

'Only three, and we are not sure of one. He owns, however, to having drunk a lot of milk when he was thirsty out shooting, and that is always suspicious. We shall know in a day or two.'

'It comes often through the milk, doesn't it?' remarked Grace dreamily; she was absorbed in the face which showed on the bed beside which she was standing. A face on the pillow. No more. All the rest tidy, folded sheet and coverlet. Such a boyish face—sleeping or unconscious. Peaceful absolutely, but so strangely aloof even from that long low room, with its endless appliances, its evidence of energy, time, money, lavished regardlessly in the effort to save.

Sister Mary smiled gently, tolerantly. 'I think generally. We always sterilise *our* milk in hospital, you know.'

As Grace Arbuthnot shook hands with the doctor, who came up at that moment, she was conscious of a confused quotation trying to formulate itself at the back of her brain, about closing doors when steeds are stolen, and sterilising seeds when they have been sown.

The doctor's kind eyes, however, drove the thought away; for they were eyes which seemed to see the nightmare, hidden under all the care and the comfort, more clearly than Sister Mary's; though hers were kind to the uttermost also —kind and quick—so that, as she passed down the row of beds with the visitors, she left the other sisters and the orderlies busy. And more than once her eyes and the doctor's—the woman's and the man's—met, after looking at a boy's face, with regret or relief in them. But no one said a word of better or worse, except now and again a wistful voice from the beds that stood so close together.

'What young faces!' said Grace in an undertone; there was a constriction in her throat which might have prevented her speaking loud had she wished to do so.

'I doubt if there is a case over two-and-twenty in the ward,' replied Dr. Sullivan, 'except'—he paused beside a cot in the far corner, where a nurse sate at the head and an orderly waited at the foot—'except this one.'

He spoke without any attempt at an aside, for the face staring up with open eyes at the ceiling was unmistakably unconscious; yet, even so, curiously haggard, weary, anxious.

'He is a hospital orderly,' went on the doctor, 'the best nurse I ever came across. I wonder how many fellows he's pulled through in his fifteen years of it. But it has got him at last, though he was careful. In a hurry possibly, and didn't disinfect; there's been a terrible rush lately, and very little will do it. Poor old Steady Normal!' He laid his hand regretfully on the anxious forehead for an instant, and the expression on his face was mirrored in those around him. 'They called him that, Lady Arbuthnot,' he explained, 'because he used to beam all over when he could echo that report. Well, if anybody pulls through, he ought to, in justice; but it's a bad case. You see, he is saturated with the poison.'

So on and on they passed, down one side and up the other, pausing by each bed to look at what lay there, and compare it with the chart which Sister Mary unhooked from the wall and handed to the doctor.

It got on Grace Arbuthnot's nerves at last—the methodical calm of it all, the smiles that were so cheerfully sympathetic or so wistfully impatient, the studious speech, the still more studious silence. Until at last, when the end was near, and Dr. Sullivan's finger, travelling over a chart, pointed out a level after a series of peaks and passes, she could not help seeking relief in the remark that 'some one was out of the wood!'

A contented smile came to the face she was leaving, but a look showed on the one she was approaching which struck her like a blow, which she felt she could never forget, so full was it of something akin to anger in its hopeless, helpless blame.

'He is in the thick of it, poor chap,' said the doctor in a low voice; 'only came in yesterday.'

And Grace's eyes, dim with tears, could scarcely see the jagged notches rising higher and higher in the fresh unfingered chart that was being shown her.

'Can nothing be done?' she asked abruptly, when the doctor was driving her over to the mess in his dogcart. The others were walking, and he had just pointed out the temporary hospital they had had to open.

He shook his head. 'God knows! Sometimes I think I could, with a free hand. We do what we can, as it is, but what can you expect when the men get sitting about the bazaars, and eating and drinking filth. There is only one way out of it now, Lady Arbuthnot, as I hope you'll tell Sir George. Get 'em away into the desert, *not* to be tempted of the devil, but to—what shall we say?—to—to get back the sinews of war!' he finished, proud of his quotation.

It was apt enough to recur more than once to Grace Arbuthnot's mind as she watched the sports; once, especially, when a tug-of-war began, and a team of boys, big enough, but soft-looking, stood up against the Artillery.

'They haven't a chance against us!' said Nevill Lloyd, with pardonable pride. 'To begin with, we are accustomed to handle ropes; and then!—of course, if the Highlanders had been here still, there'd have been a fight, but these new fellows haven't the sinew—as yet.'

They pulled pluckily, though, for all they were worth, encouraged thereat, amongst other supporters, by a number of big upstanding sepoys from the native lines. They were in *mufti*, which, however, was no disguise to their martial swagger and palpable pride of strength.

'Don't pull, brotherlings!' they advised; 'put the weight on the rope and stand steady. So! Oh, 'tis God's will! He has not given the weight yet. It will come, brothers! Meanwhile it is fate, not defeat.'

But as they turned carelessly from the end, one said to his neighbour, '*Ari bhai!* We could have taught the *tope khana-wallahs* a lesson.' And the neighbour laughed.

'Yea, if they gave us the chance, but they will not. They know we of the *pultans* are bigger and stronger than they of the *rigiments*, but they would not have the world know it; as if it could not see!'

As he stood aside cheerfully, almost respectfully, to let a smooth-faced fresh-coloured boy in a red coat pass, he proved his words, for he towered a good head above him, and could have covered two of him in breadth.

Nevill Lloyd, standing beside the Arbuthnots' carriage, overheard the remark and frowned.

'I should like to challenge those fellows,' he said vexedly. 'I know we could pull 'em over and knock the conceit out of 'em.'

'Then why don't you?' asked Lesley, smiling; she and the aide-de-camp had become fast friends, chiefly over their mutual devotion to Grace Arbuthnot.

'They won't let us. They say it is likely to rouse ill-feeling and all that. And then,' he went on frankly, 'of course it wouldn't do to get licked too often, you know, and one can't expect our boys to collar men who do dumb-bells all day like those fellows do.'

Grace, sitting beside Lesley, thought they might do worse. But, boys or men, the sports were good, and held half cantonments and not a few from the city, interested in the various events, while the sun sank slowly to the curiously limitless limit of the level horizon. Lateefa the kite-maker was there, amongst others, finding a sale for his airy nothingnesses betweenwhiles, as he passed through the crowd with that quaint cry of—

'Use eyes and choose
Eyes use and choose.'

Jehân Aziz was there also, in his third-best brocade coat, and with a half-cringing, half-defiant avoidance of Mr. Lucanaster, who, red-tied as usual, was betting gloves with Mrs. Chris Davenant. For that, the lady in question told herself, was quite the correct thing to do; and as the ball which was to prove her admittance into the best society had not yet come off, Mrs. Chris, as Jack Raymond had predicted, was careful. Though in truth she found a strict adherence to etiquette somewhat slow.

With an easier code and a greater inclination to scorn it, Sobrai Begum was finding the same thing in the half-empty bazaar, where she had been left in charge of a toothless old hag who had once enjoyed the doubtful dignity of Miss Leezie's position, but who, having grown too old for the post, had remained on in the house as a domestic drudge of the most exemplary pattern. The poor old soul, however, suffered from an all too intimate acquaintance with the gutters as they lay reeking in the chill dawns, when those

for whom she worked lay still curled up in their wadded quilts. So, when an hour or so had been spent after the approved fashion of her kind, in cozening her charge out of ill-humour, the fever fiend seized on her, and laid her by the heels in a backyard, more than half-unconscious.

Sobrai therefore, relaxed from surveillance, began to wonder sulkily how she had best utilise her freedom. She had been long enough with Miss Leezie to make her remember Lateefa's caution; to make her wonder if Dilarâm and the old ways were not best.

There was no reason, nevertheless, why they should be so. She was a clever girl in her way, with an ancestry of pride as well as wickedness; and above all, of a fierce faculty for obtaining personal gratification.

And there was none here. All was rule and regulation. No freedom, no fun, no frivolity; in a way, no choice. But that, she told herself, was the result of Miss Leezie's mean breeding. Dilarâm enjoyed herself more, and so would she, Sobrai Begum of the King's House, if *she* had the management of affairs! Miss Leezie said it would not pay; but what was money beside amusement? And who was Miss Leezie to judge? A low born, who did not know, who could not play the part!

A sudden determination to play it for an hour, and see the result, seized on the girl. She had the necessary dress; an old one of her mother's, which she had brought with her in case. The jewels were trumpery, of course, but they looked well. There would be time for a little fun, perhaps, before her task-mistress returned and the bazaar filled.

It was a full hour after this determination of hers, and the dusk had begun to fall, when a young fellow in a red coat came lounging through the still empty bazaar.

He had just come out of a six weeks' sojourn in hospital, and so his pockets were full, for a soldier's, with unstopped ration money. He had, indeed, intended to lavish some of it at the sports, and so celebrate his return to freedom; but, being still given to invalid habits, he had fallen asleep after barrack dinner, only awaking to find his comrades, and every available conveyance, gone. So, feeling ill-used, he had shirked the walk, sulked for a while, and finally, having nothing else to do, sought the perennial possibilities of the bazaar round the corner.

Even that was dreary. Sweetmeat sellers, fruit sellers, liquor sellers, had all followed their clients to the Artillery parade-ground. The very balconies were empty. So, in a mood compounded of recklessness and bitter home-sickness, he kicked up some one in the shop below Miss Leezie's apartments, insisted on drink, and sitting down on a chair placed for him over the gutter, relapsed into a sort of half-fierce, half-sullen torpor. It was not in truth very lively for a fairly well educated boy, who had only himself to thank that he was not—as his schoolfellows were, for the most part—a city clerk with a cycle! But he had been restless, and he had read *Soldiers Three* and the *Arabian Nights*.

He looked savagely round the glowing gloom—for the attractions of a musical ride by torchlight kept even the shopkeepers late, and so the cavernous shadows of their squalid shops were still unlit—and swore under his breath at India, and all its ways and works. No fun, no music-halls, no anything. Nothing worth being wicked about, even.

He gulped down the vile mixture of flat soda and bad brandy, turned his chair round to face the houses, and cocking his feet up on the plinth before the stairs which led up to Miss Leezie's balconies, settled himself to wait till the bazaar became lively. It would be more so than usual, of course, that evening, since the men had to return to barracks through it. It was only a question of waiting till some interest came into life.

One came very soon and quite unexpectedly.

This entrance to the balconies was partitioned off from the shops on either side, and consisted of a tiny, empty square, hung with a withered garland or two above the door which blocked the stairs.

This was closed; but it opened slowly, after a time, and a girl stepped out into the square, that was little bigger than a sentry-box, stepped out till the billowy curves of faded brocade about her feet almost touched those of No. 34 B Company.

He sate up and stared. This was something he had never seen before! This was the Arabian Nights!

It was, however, only Sobrai in the dress of a princess of the blood royal; softly orange and yellow in her trailing skirts, faintly purple and gold above, with a starred green veil hiding all but the gleam of sham jewels, the lustre of

false pearls, and a finger-tip placed in warning where the lips should be.

He took the hint and stared silently, his blood racing through his veins, not from any suggestion of balconies and their like, but from curiosity, from excitement, from, in a way, the admiration which is the antithesis of balconies; for though he knew it not, Sobrai's dress and address were those of the virtuous woman entertaining her lawful owner.

So, with a *salaam*, whose grace had been caught from Noormahal, the girl slipped to the ground among her brocades, and No. 34 B Company instinctively slipped his feet from the plinth also.

There was silence for a second or two; then another hand stole out from the green and gold stars that were so shadowy, yet so clear. A hand clasping an hour-glass drum by its narrow waist, and twirling it gently so that the leaded silken tassels on its fringe did the duty of fingers, and sent that strange unrest throbbing out into the air.

But the voice that followed it robbed the sound of its usual character, and took the restlessness into a definite cause. For Sobrai's song was not of the bazaars. It was of the palaces. A bard's song of old days and dead kings, of war, and death, and victory. No. 34 B Company sate with his hands clenching his knees and listened almost stupidly, until, suddenly, a returning torch flung a great beam of glaring light into the shadows which almost hid the singer, and revealed a pair of black eyes amid the stars.

He stood up then, and caught his breath in hard.

This was ripping, simply ripping. He had not had to use the adjective for months, and with it came back a world of recollection—of idle harmless larks, of boyish mischief. It almost seemed as if the figure understood, for a gleam of pure mischief came to the black eyes, as Sobrai stood up also. In truth she found it ripping also, the only bit of fun she had had in a fortnight's freedom!

And behind No. 34 B Company's red coat some fresh spectators had gathered, curious, surprised.

A sudden dare-devil delight seized on the girl, her voice rose to its fullest pitch, she began to dance. Not with the posturings and suggestions of the bazaar, but with dignified gestures and scarcely perceptible swayings suited to her heavy robes, and to the words she sang. And all but her

eyes were still covered by the green and the stars. And now a rushlight or two, caught hastily from the neighbouring shops, came to show more distinctly that graceful figure, and a voice or two in English called out to friends behind to come and see.

The bazaar was re-filling; but it was forgetting other things in her—Sobrai!

The thought, the unmistakable admiration, drove caution to the right-about. Let Miss Leezie come and see, if she chose! See that the apprentice had been right, that it was amusement people wanted!

For the present, indeed, it seemed so.

How long the novelty might have kept familiarity in check, it is impossible to say; for there was Miss Leezie horrified, indignant, forcing her way shrilly through a gathering of red-coats sufficient to ruin the good name of her house, should it be seen by any of the authorities.

And Heaven only knew whether some might not fancy that bazaar as a short-cut home!

'You let 'er be—she's worth ten o' your lot,' remonstrated more than one voice; but No. 34 B Company had got further in admiration than that. Sobrai, for the time, had captured his imagination. It was vice against virtue, or at any rate dull sensuality against romance.

Perhaps Sobrai saw something of this in his eyes. Anyhow, with a fierce exultation, she threw back her veil, and the hour-glass drum, twirled above her head, sent its message out over the clustering crowd.

So it came to pass that Lady Arbuthnot, driving home, saw in the flesh what she had seen in her mind's eye—the woman's figure centring a circle of eager men's faces.

'Stand back! clear the way! *Hut! Hut!*' came the orders of policemen, recalled to a sense of duty. Then came a louder one, as an inspector on his way back rode up to see what caused the block.

In an instant there was an uproar, a boy's voice, 'Don't you touch her, you——' a scuffle, a blow, a fall, a girl's shriek.

Finally there was a lull, with two red-coats, under the orders of a passing officer, holding back a third, Miss Leezie protesting innocence, and a girl, still defiant, shrinking back into the darkest corner of the narrow entrance.

'She doth not belong to me,' shrilled Miss Leezie. 'She comes from the city. I am not responsible. I will prove her thief.'

'It is a lie! I am no thief,' gasped Sobrai, shrinking still farther from the policeman, who stepped up on to the plinth, while the red-coat, held by the other two, struggled madly.

'Oh! dash it all,' muttered the officer to himself, 'this can't be allowed. Sergeant, send your prisoner to the quarter-guard under escort, and see that every one returns to barracks at once. Constable, arrest both women.'

Miss Leezie fell on her knees and shrieked.

'*Huzoor!* I can prove her thief. She hath pearls like the Lady-*sahib's* pearls. She offered them to me as a bribe to take her into my house this very day, and I, dissembling, said I would see, and kept the pearls to show the police. I have them. She is thief for sure!'

'Touch me not! I am no thief; they are mine!' panted Sobrai as the policeman dragged her forward. Then, as the sense of indignity came to her, she fought desperately. 'I am no thief—I am no common woman. Touch me not, I am Sobrai of the Nawâb's house! The pearls are his. I am princess, I say! Will none help me? Oh! Lateef, Lateef! say it is true!'

She had broken from her captor with sudden irresistible passion, and thrown herself at the feet of some one who had newly pushed his way into the crowd; so, her hands clasping a pair of thin legs, she looked in frantic appeal to the thin face of the kite-maker.

But Lateefa knew his part of hanger-on to nobility better than to admit anything derogatory to its honour. He essayed to pass on with his quaint cry—

'Use eyes and choose,
Use and choose.'

It was, perhaps, an unfortunately well-known one; and many of those present, seeing the girl's brocades and remembering her gestures, hesitated; while one said—

'He is Lateefa of Jehân's house for sure. She hath his name pat. Mayhap she says truth!'

The sergeant of police pulled out another pair of handcuffs with evident joy.

'There is room for both in the lock-up,' he said cheerfully.

Lateefa gave a jerk to the string he held, which sent the single kite, which he always reserved as his trade-mark, skimming downwards in the gloom, to rise again higher than ever.

'Mayhap! I am Lateef, for sure, as God made me. And she is what the devil made her—a woman!'

There was something of Lateefa's philosophy in the police-officer's words when, an hour or two later, he called round at Government House to say that four pearls, apparently belonging to Lady Arbuthnot's string, had been found in the Lal bazaar in a dancing-girl's house.

'The house where I saw that girl as I passed?' asked Grace quickly. She felt, somehow, that it must be so; that there was a fate in it.

'I expect so,' answered the police-officer, then he paused. 'It is likely to be a troublesome case, sir,' he continued, turning to Sir George, 'for she claims to belong to the Nawâb's house. And as if that wasn't enough, it seems that one of the soldiers knocked a man down. Just knocked him down as one would anybody, you know. He seemed none the worse for half an hour, when he suddenly went out. Spleen, of course. I wonder when Tommy will remember that half the natives about him ought to be in glass cases!'

Sir George Arbuthnot frowned too. 'It is most unfortunate; especially just now. These women are really——' he paused and looked apologetically at his wife. 'However, we shall have no more of this sort of thing. Both regiments go out to Morâdki as soon as we can get the carriage together. We settled that finally. The desert will do them good!'

CHAPTER XI

THE SPIRIT OF KINGS AND SLAVES

JERRY ARBUTHNOT, in his smart little riding-suit, was seated on the top step of John Ellison's tomb, his pony, meanwhile, held by a syce, trying to snatch a bite of long grass growing close to the bottom one. Between the two, forming a pyramid of which the child's dainty little figure made the apex, were several other figures. First of all, bareheaded, eminently respectable in a clean suit of drill, was Jân-Ali-shân, seated sideways a step below, his face towards Jerry. Below again—crouched up knees and elbows—was Budlu the caretaker, his eyes on Jân-Ali-shân's; and beside him, resplendent in red coat and gold lace, the Mohammedan *chuprassi* told off to accompany his little master on his morning rides. For the dew still lay heavy on the grass, like hoar-frost, so that the hoopoes, hopping over it in the search for food, left greener trails behind them to lattice the grey glisten.

'Then,' came the child's clear, high voice, 'you are quite the most youngest hero of the lot—sir.'

He hesitated over the title; finally gave it, palpably, as a tribute to the heroism, perhaps to the name. Jân-Ali-shân brushed a faint speck of dust from his white drill. 'That is so, sir. I was but a two month when I done the job, an' that don't leave much margin for honest competition. It runs to a mono-polly; that's what it do, sir, a regular mono-polly.' He tailed off into

> 'Polly, my Polly; she is so jolly,
> The jolliest craft in the world!'

which he carolled cheerfully, making the hoopoes cock their crests and hold their heads on one side to listen.

Jerry sate looking at them thoughtfully. 'I was afwaid you must be, 'cos, you see, it's such ages ago,' he said at last, argumentatively. 'Ages an' ages. I wasn't even near

borned then. How much older 'n me d'you s'ppose you are, sir?'

It was Jân-Ali-shân's turn to look at Heaven's messenger-birds thoughtfully, and admire their golden crowns. Then he drew his white drill cuffs down over his tanned wrists, as if to hide as much of himself as was possible.

'Older?' he echoed. 'Why—six-an'-thirty year, I should say; six-an'-thirty year o' constant wickedness—that's about it, sir—o' constant wickedness, please God!' He hovered over a penitential response in a minor key, and then nodded at the child cheerfully. 'But don't you fret, sir. There ain't no call for it. You're all right—your time'll come; only you must grow a bit more, or you wouldn't never fill a grave like this—would 'e, Budlu?'

He laid his hand on the tombstone and smiled; so did Budlu and the *chuprassi*, uncomprehendingly; so, reluctantly, did Jerry.

'It's an orful time to wait,' he said regretfully, 'an' there's goin' to be a row quite soon. Dad doesn't say so, but he thinks it; for I heard 'em talking of what they'd have to do if there was one; but they hadn't settled when Miss Dwummond came for me. What do you think would be the best thing, Mr. Ellison?'

'Lick 'em, sir, for sure,' replied Jân-Ali-shân succinctly.

Jerry's face flushed sharply, almost with vexation.

'Oh! of course, we'd lick 'em; but I meant what kind of things, just to show 'em, you know, that—that——' he paused, as he often did, bewildered by his own thoughts.

'Show 'em?' echoed John Ellison. 'Show 'em? Why! show 'em, that it's "*as you was!*" That there ain't no change. That it's still flags flyin' an'

"Gord save our gracious Queen."'

Jerry rose solemnly and took off his cap as the notes of the National Anthem floated out over the garden mound into the crisp morning air, in which even the nearer shadows showed blue as the distant ones.

'I thought that would be it myself,' he commented, heaving a sigh of relief, 'but I'm glad to be sure. Thanks, so much.'

The others, duteously following his lead, had risen also, and now Jân-Ali-shân, who had reached for the helmet

which had been lying on the steps beside him, stood looking into it with a half-prayerful expression before putting it on; for time was passing, and he was due at his work.

'You're welcome, sir, kindly welcome,' he said, after a pause. 'So jest you wait patient—say six-an'-thirty year. An' then, if you ain't got an 'ero's grave of your own as you can slip into when you fancies it—why, John Ellison—that's me, sir—'ll up an' give you 'is, an'—an'—chanst the constant wickedness! There, sir'—he spoke with conscious pride in the magnitude of his offer—'I can't say fairer nor that, so there's my 'and on it; for if ever there was a chip of the old block, it's you, sir—the chippiest of the chippiest.'

He reached out a big brown paw, and Jerry with great dignity laid his soft white one in it.

'Thanks orfully,' said the child, 'but I won't bovver you; I'll get one of my vewy own, please.'

'You bet!' remarked Jân-Ali-shân briefly. 'That's the game to play. Same as 'im and me played forty years back. Same's you and some other chap'll play forty years on. Time's no hobject, only a comfortable 'ome. Well, good day to you, sir; an' if ever you wants John Ellison, you'll find me here, mornin's and evenin's, most days, on my way to work; for 'e and me's been pals a many years.'

As he walked off jauntily, his hands in his pockets, he paraphrased 'John Anderson my Jo' into Ellison, and put the expression stop full on at the last quatrain.

> 'Now we maun totter down, John,
> But hand in hand we'll come
> 'nd sleep together at the foot.'

He paused here at the gate which ended the rising path, and waved a hand back at the group in the hollow, ere the snick of the latch started him again on the refrain,

> 'John Ellison, my chum.'

So he passed, with a curious mixture of swing and slouch, along the dusty roads towards the railway station, which lay on the outskirts of the town, about a quarter of a mile from the bridge. Like the latter, it was a semi-fortified structure, capable of some defence. The more so because the city wall, which it faced, was in itself an obstacle to attack from that quarter; since it was largely a retaining wall to the higher ground of the city within, and therefore solid, blank; until at

the river end it jutted into a bastion, loopholed and embrasured. But even this would be of little use to a foe, for the brickwork was cracked from the parapet right down to the water's edge, and the whole building sloped outwards, as if even the firing of a cannon would send it toppling over into the river. Indeed, the advisability of so sending it safely under control of science, before chance interfered and sent it crashing into the railway bridge, had more than once been urged on the authorities. The bastion, however, happened to be part of a royal building which had been given for life to a very old pensioner; so it had been decided that destruction should await his death, unless matters became worse.

Therefore Jehân, as head of the six hundred of his like in Nushapore, still found it the best place in the whole city whence to fly kites; for there was generally a breeze off the river, and daylight lingered long, reflected from the glistening water.

So, at all times of the day, and occasionally by the help of a full moon, the royal pensioners gathered strong on the bastion. Quite a little court of them—reminiscent, strangely, of that dead dispossessed court of old days—centred round Jehân the Heir of all Things or Nothing. And they would pledge and pawn everything they possessed, except their pride, on the results of Lateefa's skill with paste and paper.

Half a dozen or more of these courtiers without a court or a king were lounging on the bastion waiting for Jehân to fly a match with another princeling of royal blood, when Jân-Ali-shân's trolly skimmed past on the line below it. They craned their yellow faces to look at him and the little knot of coolies who were pushing all they knew at the trolly; for Chris Davenant had bidden his overseer be at the drawbridge pier at eight o'clock to look over the machinery, and it was already five minutes past the hour. So Jân-Ali-shân had first hustled his own subordinates with oaths and abuse, into the utmost haste, and was now preparing the half-confidential, half-apologetic look of an offender for his own face—since he could see his superior officer's figure leaning over the iron lattice of the bridge waiting for him. Hurried as he was, however, he looked up, waved his hand to the group on the bastion, and called, '*Ram-ram*, gents, and *Mohommed-russool!*' a salutation (compounded from Hindoo and Mohammedan formulæ) which, he would explain elaborately, prevented

him from 'either 'inderin' weak brothers, or bowin' in any particklar 'ouse o' Rimming.' For his seven years in a 'surplus chore' had given him a curious knowledge of Scripture.

'We had better begin by seeing if the hydraulic tank is full up,' said Chris calmly, as the trolly stopped in prompt obedience to Jân-Ali-shân's imperative, 'Woa! I say woa! Didn't I tell yer to *tyro* (stop) at the *pyli* (first) pier.'

'Ay, ay, sir!' he answered, his face expressing a certain disappointment; and as he obeyed orders by climbing up an iron ladder which the coolies brought from its hooks on the pier, and fixed to a reservoir on the roof of the arched gateway, he shook his head gravely.

'It don't give a chap a fair chanst,' he muttered to himself as he mounted higher and higher. 'It ain't bracin' enough, that's what it ain't. Now, if 'e'd a said, "D—n you, if you're late agin, I'll cut yer pay," it 'u'd 'ave given a fellow a straight tip up the narrer path.' Here he paused to measure with a foot-rule, and hummed the while,

'A banner with a strange device—Ex—cel—si—or.'

'An' it don't come 'ome to the 'eart if you says it yourself,' he added despondently, 'not even if you uses fancy swears.'

These had an excellent effect, however, on the coolies, to whom they came simply as forcible imperatives; so that in a very few minutes the iron girders on either side had reared themselves back on the central tower, and the little party stood isolated both from the bridge and the bank.

'It 's as right as a trivet, sir!' said John Ellison, 'barrin' bein' a bit stiff on the crank, but a drop o' hoil 'll set that easy, for it ain't a ten-men job, as they made it, but a two—that 's what it is—a two at most.'

But when the drop of oil had been applied, two men failed to start the hydraulic pressure, much to Jân-Ali-shân's disgust. He set one couple after another of his men to tackle the job, without avail.

'Look 'ere, sir,' he said at last, persuasively, 'I'd take it a kindness if you'd jest lend me the sight o' your 'and for a moment. If I does it all myself, they 'll begin to talk that *ik-bally*[1] rot o' theirs, like as I was Sandow himself, but if they see your 'and in it too, it 'll be 'uman beings—that 's what it 'll be.'

[1] *Ikbal*, lit. power, prestige.

So Chris Davenant's thin nervous brown hand gripped the spindle, and Jân-Ali-shân's great paw—fresh as it was from the clasp of Jerry's small one—gripped the spindle also. The two, side by side, feeling each other's touch, feeling, for all we know, that other touch of the child who would come to such man's work after long years. Why should it not make itself felt, in more ways than one, that strange force which bids the race continue, which gives the spirit of kings or the spirit of slaves?

Then, with a slow gurgle, the water filled the cylinder, and the massive iron girders came down once more, to bridge the gulf and make a permanent way between the east and the west banks of the wide river, which slid past silently, bringing no message from its birthplace, taking no message to its grave in the sea.

'Best 'ave 'er up an' down agin onst more, sir,' said Jân-Ali-shân, 'then there'll be fair odds on a continooance of virtoo. There's nothin' like 'abit, sir.'

He heaved a regretful sigh, and this time the water gurgled out of the cylinder.

'Behaves beautiful, she do,' he commented when, the drawbridge having risen and descended again, he had set the coolies to work pumping a fresh supply of water into the cistern, and had gone himself to lean over the iron latticing at a decently respectful distance from his superior officer, who was doing the same thing. The parting stream—its perfect placidity lost by the obstruction of the wide pier—swept under the girders in little petulant wrinkles and furrows. But even through these sears and seams of current, the jutting spit of rock—which yielded firm foothold for this first span of the railway bridge, yet with equal impartiality gave firm foundation closer in-shore to the new temple of Kâli which challenged the old temple of Viseshwar—could be seen, clearly or dimly, as its broken contours dipped or rose beneath the water.

'Quite the lydy, she is,' went on Jân-Ali-shân, continuing his approval of the drawbridge. 'Ain't got no games in 'er —'olds out 'er arms if she likes you, an' draws in 'er arms if she don't. That 's the sort.'

And then some link of thought started him on a song which shared first favourite honours with

'Her golding 'air all 'anging down 'er back,'

in the estimation of his sing-song audiences, and the notes of

'Where'er you walk,'

echoed out over the river, and made the bathers on the temple steps, who had been watching the proceedings, look up once more towards the bridge.

'Where'er you walk,
Cool gales shall fan the glade;
Trees where you sit
Shall crowd into a shade;
Where'er you tread, the blushing flowers shall rise,
And all things flourish where you turn your eyes.'

The most passionate, yet the purest, praise a woman ever won from man, perfect in its self-forgetfulness, in its delight in the admiration of the whole world for what is praised, fell from John Ellison's lips in almost perfect style; for he had been taught the song in those early days of surpliced choirs.

And Chris Davenant, as he listened, staring out over the river, clinched his hands on the iron rail in a sudden passion of self-pity.

This is what he had found in the poets of the West! This was what he had sought in the prose of life! It was for this he had forsaken so much—this white-robed woman with the breezes cooling the hot blood, and the trees crowding to shade her from the fierce heat of noon!

And he had found—what?

Something worse?—yes!—for one brief second he admitted the truth that it *was* worse; that Naraini, despite her ignorance, would have given him something nearer to that ideal of all men who were worth calling men, than Viva with her cigarettes, her pink ruffles, her strange mixture of refinement and coarseness, of absolute contempt for passion and constant appeal to it. Why had he ever forsaken his people? Why had he ever forsaken her—Naraini?

'I am Brahmin, my hand is pure.'

The memory of her voice, her face, as she spoke the words returned to him, and, with an irresistible rush, all that had swept him from his moorings, swept him from the common current of the lives around him, all the sentimentality, all the intuitive bias towards things spiritual, swept him back again to that life—and to Naraini!

'It's a rippin' song, ain't it, sir?' remarked Jân-Ali-shân, who had been warbling away at the runs and trills like any blackbird, as he watched Chris Davenant's listening face. 'Wraps itself round a feller somehow. Kep' me from a lot o' tommy rot, that song 'as in my time, an' sent me to the flowing bowl instead.'

As he walked over to see if the tank was full, he whistled,

> 'Let the toast pass, here's to the lass,
> I'll warrant she'll prove an excuse for a glass,'

with jaunty unconcern. He returned in a moment, the coolies behind him carrying the iron ladder back to its hooks on the pier.

'All right, sir,' he reported. 'Give 'er two men an' she'll 'old her own against a thousand.'

Chris, absorbed in his thoughts, made an effort to wrench himself from them by assenting.

'Yes. They'd find it difficult without guns, unless they could manage it by the river.'

Jân-Ali-shân shook his head. 'Not if we'd a rifle or two aboard, sir, to nick 'em off in the boats.'

'Couldn't they get along the spit,' suggested Chris, absolutely at random.

'Might be done, mayhap,' admitted the other, after a reflective pause. 'Leastways, if you was a "*Ram Rammer*" an' 'ad a right o' way through the 'ouse o' Rimming—beg pardin, sir, though you '*ave* chucked old 'Oneyman an' 'is lot—I mean, if you was a Hindoo an' they'd let you through the temple. But even then we could nick 'em in the water afore they could get ropes slung.'

'There's the ladder,' suggested Chris once more. He was not thinking of what he said. He was asking himself *what* he had not 'chucked' away recklessly? 'It is only about six feet up; they could easily——'

'They could easily do a lot if they was let, sir,' interrupted Jân-Ali-shân, as he turned to go, with a pitying look. 'But we don't let 'em. That's how it is. An' we ain't such bally fools as to leave 'em ladders. No, sir! Two men—if they *was* men—'u'd keep that pier a Christian country for a tidy time.'

As the trolly buzzed back stationwards, the group of yellow faces above the faded brocades gave up watching the manœuvres of the drawbridge, and returned to their kite-

flying; and on the bathing-steps the men and women returned to the day's work. On the bastion there was a shade more listless doubt and dislike, on the steps a shade more uneasy wonder as to the signs of the times. That was all.

Only Burkut Ali, as he weighted his kite's tail with an extra grain or two of rice, nodded his head, and said with a sinister look—

'Two could play that game, and the first come would be master. "*He who sits on the throne is king.*"'

'And he who sits not is none,' added Jehân's antagonist with a wink. He had quarrelled two days before with the Rightful Heir's pretensions to authority in the matter of a dancing-girl, and so, for the time being, headed the dissentient party which, with ever-shifting numbers and combinations, made the royal house—to the great satisfaction of the authorities—one divided against itself. 'If the Sun of the Universe is ready,' he went on, with mock ceremony, 'his slave waits to begin the match.'

Jehân's face sharpened with anger. He had come there in an evil temper, because, after having virtuously denied himself an over-night orgy for the sake of steadying his hand for the match, Lateefa—on whom he had relied for a super-excellent new kite—had neither turned up nor sent an excuse; consequently the chances of victory were small. And now this ill-conditioned hound was palpably insolent. The fact roused Jehân's pretensions, and made him assert them.

'I fly no kite to-day,' he said haughtily, 'the match will be to-morrow.'

His opponent smiled. 'As my lord chooses!' he replied coolly, 'his slave is ready to give revenge at any time.'

'Revenge!' echoed Jehân sharply, 'wherefore revenge? There is no defeat.'

'His Highness forgets,' said the other, with a pretence of humility scarcely hiding his malice, 'the Most Learned, being member of race-clubs, must know that "scratch" is victory to the antagonist. This day's match therefore is mine. Is not that the rule, *meean*?'

He appealed to the most sporting member of the court, but Jehân, without waiting for his verdict, broke into fierce invective, and had passed from the rules to the rulers, when

Burkut—who had been listening with that sinister look of his—touched him peremptorily on the arm, and said—

'Have a care, Nawâb-*sahib*, some one comes.'

Jehân turned quickly, and saw behind him a sergeant of police.

He came with a summons for the Nawâb-*sahib* Jehân Aziz to attend at once at the cantonment police-station.

Still confused by his anger, and scarcely master of himself, Jehân stood looking at the paper put in his hand, and trying to disentangle from the smudge of the lithographed form the few written words which would give him a key to the rest.

The first he saw was '*Sobrai Begum*,' the next '*Lateefa*.'

They pulled his pride and his cunning together in quick self-defence. Though a fierce longing to have the jade's throat within the grip of his thin fingers surged up in him, the desire to put her away privily was stronger. He folded up the paper with a shrug of his shoulders, and turned on the curious faces around him.

''Tis only Lateefa in trouble with a woman,' he began.

'And they need his master's virtue to get him out of it!' sneered his opponent. ''Tis too bad; were I the Nawâb, I would keep mine for my own use——'

The Rightful Heir glared at the giber, and a vast resentment at his own impotence came to the descendant of kings. Why was he not able, as his fathers had been, to sweep such vermin from his path? Why had he to obey the orders of every jack-in-office? Then for Sobrai herself. Why could he not settle her in the good old fashion without any one's help?

As he drove over to cantonments in the ramshackle wagonette this desire overbore the others, and his cunning centred round the possibility of getting the baggage back to the ruined old house, where screams could be so easily stifled.

The first step, of course, was to see Lateefa in private and hear his version of the story. That meant ten rupees to the constable in charge of the lock-up, but it was better to pay that, at first, than hundreds of rupees of hush-money afterwards if the police went against you.

So the silver key slipped into the sergeant's pocket, and the iron one came out which opened the barred door behind which Lateefa sat like a wild beast in a cage—Sobrai, meanwhile, being accommodated with free lodgings under the charge of an old hag in a discreetly private cell round the corner!

Jehân's face grew more and more savage as he listened to what the kite-maker had to tell; and that was a good deal, for he had gossiped half the night with the sentry on duty!

Miss Leezie—Sobrai singing in the public bazaar to the soldiers—all this was so much gall and wormwood to the Nawâb's pride. It almost made him forget the theft of the pearls; the more so because the idea of the latter was not quite new to him. Mr. Lucanaster's assertion that there were five amissing, joined to the fact that poor Aunt Khôjee, hoping thereby to smooth over the quarrel between him and Noor-mahal, had brought him one pearl which had been found in a rent in a cushion, had made him suspicious that Sobrai had the rest; that this, indeed, had been at the bottom of her flight. It was only, therefore, when Lateefa pointed out that it would be necessary to prove that these pearls of Sobrai's were not the Lady-*sahib*'s pearls, before the girl—free from the suspicion of theft—could be handed over to her lawful guardians, that he realised it would not be enough to *say* that they were his, that he had given them to the girl, who—despite her evil doings—he was willing to receive back again into his virtuous house. For the possibility of denying her assertion that she belonged to it, had, he felt, vanished with her unfortunate recognition of Lateefa.

But now there must be proof, and the proof lay in Mr. Lucanaster's hands.

Jehân felt hemmed in, harried on all sides, and he was the poorer by fifty rupees before he bribed his way to an informal interview with the cantonment magistrate, and was able to lay before that official a carefully-concocted admixture of truth and falsehood which should help to secure what he chiefly needed, secrecy and delay.

To this end, by Lateefa's advice, he made it appear that Sobrai had been enticed away by Miss Leezie, and pointed out that such a tale might give rise to trouble—complicated as it was by that fatal blow of No. 34 B Company's—if it became known, especially in these restless times. Much, therefore, as he felt the injury, the disgrace to himself and his house, he was willing to hold his tongue about it provided *other people held theirs*. As for the pearls, if, after private inquiries, it was necessary for him to prove his words, he would do so. And, in the meantime, it would only cause

suspicion if Lateefa, who was known to be a member of his household, were detained.

The cantonment magistrate looked at him doubtfully; he was almost too suave, too sensible. Yet there could be no doubt that the case might be a troublesome one. As the Nawâb said, Miss Leezie might be fined for keeping her house disorderly, Sobrai detained pending inquiries, and Lateefa dismissed without in any way militating against the ordinary course of justice, should the Nawâb's version prove false; and if not, he was, in a way, entitled to consideration. Especially if he would keep the abduction quiet, in view of that possible murder case.

'You had better come up again in two or three days,' said the magistrate finally, 'by which time the police, who will have instructions to conduct their inquiries in strict confidence, will know if they require proofs, and you could produce the remaining pearls, of course. If they do not, the girl shall be handed over to you as her natural guardian, and that will end the matter, unless her evidence is required.'

'*Huzoor!*' said Jehân, with profuse *salaams*, 'that would end the matter to my complete satisfaction and eternal gratitude.'

The look about his red betel-stained lips, as they wreathed themselves with obsequious smiles, was that of a carnivorous animal which scents its prey, and there was almost a triumph in his face as he drove back to the city with Lateefa. He felt himself powerful for once; for he knew that if once he could get Sobrai back, he could torture and kill the girl behind the purdah, which none would dare to invade; in which he was still king—as much a king as any of his ancestors.

If he could get her there!

The only difficulty in the way of that, Jehân knew and faced instantly.

If proof were needed, Lucanaster would never give up the pearls, never forbear saying that in his opinion they were the Lady-*sahib*'s and none other, unless he got the emerald in exchange. Well! he, Jehân, must have the emerald ready in case it was wanted. Then the thought that he might have so had it, ready in his own possession, but for little Sa'adut, made him call himself a fool for yielding to the child's tears.

They would have been over and forgotten in a minute; for what could the child want with an emerald ring? A useless bauble, not even fit to be a toy!

CHAPTER XII

A MOTHER'S DIRGE

BUT little Sa'adut was of a different opinion. He had found that question as to which of his fingers came nearest to filling the gold circle of the ring an absolutely entrancing one; the more so because, from some reason or another, those fingers had suddenly taken to wasting away. Thus, the two which fitted best one day might not be the two which fitted best on the next.

'Lo! the ring hath bewitched him!' whimpered Aunt Khâdjee, when the child could scarcely be distracted from the puzzle to take the food which only Auntie Khôjee could coax him to eat.

Patient Auntie Khôjee, who would have sate all day and all night beside the string cot like that other woman's figure, if there had not been so many things which only she could do, now that they had no servant at all. So Noormahal alone, her face half hidden in her veil, watched the child hungrily; since from some reason or another, as mysterious as the sudden wasting away which had come to the poor little body, a fretful intolerance of clasping arms and caressing hands had come to the poor little mind. The child cried when his mother held him, and only lay content among the cushions of state which Khôjee brought out for daily use recklessly, so that the little Heir's resting-place should be as soft as a King's.

There was nothing, indeed, of such care and comfort as these women could compass, that Sa'adut lacked; nothing, in fact, of any kind which even richer folk of their sort could have given him; for they too would not have had the least elementary knowledge of what nursing could or could not do for such sickness as his. Before that mysterious slackening of grip on life, these women, the one who watched, the

one who worked, the one who whimpered beside that cot set in the sunshine, were absolutely helpless. They knew nothing. They could not even tell, day by day, if the child were worse or better. If he slept a while, or drank a spoonful of milk, they praised God; and once when they had propped him up with pillows, and set a gay new cap jauntily on his damp hair, they almost wept for joy to think he was better. And when the consequent fatigue made it all too evident that they were mistaken, they never recognised that the change for the worse was due to the sitting-up.

It was after this that Khâdjee, with floods of tears, gave the only jewels she did not wear to be pawned in order that a *hakeem* might be called in. And then she cried herself sick over the loss, so that, when the medicine-man *did* come, he had two patients instead of one. He was a smiling old pantaloon who had been court physician, and as such had attended Sa'adut's great-grandfather; who talked toothlessly of the *yunâni* system of medicine, and of things hot and things cold, of things strong and things weak, to Aunt Khâdjee's great delight. Indeed, she took up most of the time in detailing her own complaints, so that, in the end, he reassured them hastily as to the child, by saying that all he needed was a conserve, a mere conserve! But it proved to be a conserve of palaces, containing thirty-six ingredients, the cheapest of which was beaten silver leaf! So what with it and Auntie Khâdjee's emulsion, poor Khôjee's housekeeping purse was empty after a few doses. But she sate up o' nights spinning, and so gathered enough to call in another medicine-man. This one was of a different sort; long-bearded, solemn, with sonorous Arabic blessings. He had ordered paper pellets with the attributes of the Almighty inscribed on them.

These, at least, were not expensive; these, at least, were within the reach of poverty—even the abject, helpless poverty of these high-born ladies. So Auntie Khâdjee, forsaking her tinsel cap-making, recalled the teachings of her youth, and by the aid of the smoke-stained Koran, from which she chanted her portion like a parrot every morning, traced the words on to tissue paper with difficulty—she suffered from rheumatic gout, though she did not know it was anything but old age—and Khôjee rolled them into pills, and covered them with silver leaf and sugar, and put them in the sweeties, which were the only thing the child cared for. So he would

swallow Mercy, and Truth, and Charity, and Justice, and Strength, as he lay in the sunshine on the cushions of state playing with the ring on which was scratched, '*By the Grace of God, Defender of the Faith.*'

The courtyard was very quiet, very empty, as yet, for the child was not yet near enough to death to be an attraction to the neighbours. He had been ill so long, and now was a little worse; that was all those three women told themselves. They had no means of realising that the disease, long-sluggish, had roused itself to fierce energy; that the days, almost the hours, were numbered.

So Noormahal watched the child's least movement day and night, and Khâdjee wrote the attributes of God for the paper pills, while Khôjee worked her old fingers sore, or tramped about openly to do the marketing. But no matter how pressed for time she was, no matter how far from home, her old hands or feet hurried up, so that they should be free for another task at sunset; a task which, so long as they had had a servant, had never been omitted, and must not be omitted now—must never be omitted so long as these crumbling walls and the wide empty courtyard held the heir to a Kingship. And this task was the sounding of the *naubut* from the gateway where the stucco peacocks still spread their plaster tails.

In the old days, this ceremony of sounding the royal kettledrums as a sign that majesty lived within, had been quite an imposing one. Then, a *posse* of liveried servants and soldiers had gone up into the *naubat khana*, and whacked away at a whole row of slung kettledrums, and blared away at the royal *nakârahs*, until all the city knew that sunset had found the King still on his throne. But for some years back it had been very different; a half-hearted apologetic drubbing on one dilapidated drum, a breathless blowing of an uncertain horn had been all. And now, when only one poor tired old woman limped up the broken stairs, it was a very feeble claim to royalty, indeed, that echoed into the courtyard below, though Khôjee drummed valiantly for all she could, and blew her withered cheeks plump as a cherub's over the *nakârah*. Feeble as it was, however, it could be heard, and it brought comfort even to Noormahal's hungry heart; for it meant that the child was still on his throne at sunset. And that was all the world to those lonely women, shut up incon-

ceivably, helplessly, from all hope, almost from all desire for help from that outside world, into which only Aunt Khôjee ventured at times timorously; and only to return poorer, more helpless than she went out.

Once, however, when—at the risk of a fit of hysterics, which might incapacitate Aunt Khâdjee from even the writing of paper pellets—Khôjee had persuaded her to allow the little knot of silver earrings without which no court lady could be considered decently clothed, to pay a temporary visit to the pawnbroker, Khôjee had come back from that outside world with a new look of hope on her face.

A piece of luck had befallen her. She had met, quite by chance, an old servant of her mother's, who, when the court had been broken up, had taken service as *ayah* with the *mems*. And this old dame happened to have in her possession a priceless European medicine for just such delicate children as Sa'adut.

A *mem* had given it to her, she said, when her child needed it no more. She did not add that the child, despite the Brand's essence of beef and the care of three doctors, had wasted away into its grave quite as quickly as Sa'adut was doing with neither, and that the unopened tins had been part of her perquisites when the stricken parents had sought distraction from grief in three months' leave. She only said that they were worth rupees on rupees, but that Khôjee might have them for three, because it was for the little Heir. So the patient bent figure and the limp had come back to that cot set in the sunshine, with the feeling that now, at last, the child who lay among the faded cushions of state *must* pick up strength, since all the world knew that whatever faults the *Huzoors* had, they were clever doctors—all too clever perhaps!

But there could be no danger of poison here. This was the actual medicine a *mem* had given her own child. This must be the real thing. Still, to make sure, they continued the paper pellets, since Mercy and Truth, and Justice and Charity must counteract any nefarious intent!

Even with this mixed diet of the East and West, of essence of faith and essence of beef, Sa'adut gained nothing. He continued to lose, though the women refused to see it.

For the courtyard was still quiet. Perhaps once or twice a day some gad-about neighbour in passing would look in,

and for half an hour or so after she had left, Noormahal's big brooding black eyes would be on the door of the women's courtyard, with a fierce fear in them. The fear lest she should see the shadow of another new-comer on the angled brick screen before the door; the screen built on purpose to show such warning shadows. In other words, the fear that those strange eyes should have thought it worth while to send other eyes to look on a sight that would not be long seen, either in sunshine or shadow.

But the stillness would remain unbroken, and her gaze would go back to Sa'adut, ready for her to smile assent when he should smile up at her and say, 'Look! *Amma-jân*,' because he had managed to jam the ring hard and fast over some combination of fingers.

The days and nights were cloudless, the air kindly and warm, and in the silence which comes with the darkness—even to a large town when there is no wheeled traffic in it, and the footsteps of men have ceased from going up and down the city—the only sound which came to disturb the courtyard was the shriek of the railway whistle,—an almost incredible sound in that environment.

So the days and nights following on Jehân's vow never to set foot in the house again, dragged by.

'Were it not best to tell his father?' suggested Khôjee, the peace-maker, one evening when she came down breathless from that futile beating of kettledrums and blowing of horns, to find Sa'adut without his usual smile for her efforts. 'He is fond of his father, and it might rouse him.'

Noormahal leant forward, and gripped the cot with both hands. 'No!' she said passionately. 'May I not keep this myself? He is no worse, fool! Thou didst not sound the *naubut* well, that is all. I could scarce hear it myself.'

That might well be, Aunt Khôjee thought humbly, seeing that she was not used to the beating of drums and the blowing of horns, and that both were cracked and dilapidated almost past beating and blowing. Still, even she would not allow the child to be worse, not even in the watches of the night, when a body's thoughts cannot always stay themselves on the will of God, when railway whistles and other strange sounds set the mind questioning what will come, and why it should come.

And this night, just at the turn of twelve, when the night

of a past day turns into the night of a coming one, a voice rose on the darkness as it sometimes did; the voice of a telegraph *peon* seeking an unknown owner for a telegram.

'O Addum! O Addum Khân! dweller in the Place of Sojourners in the quarter of Palaces! Awake! Arise! O Addum! a message hath come for thee. Awake! Arise! O Sleepers! awake and say where is Addum Khân for whom a message to go on a journey hath come.'

So, on and on insistently, the man Addum—quaintly namesake of the man in whose name all men go on the great journey—was sought; until the rattle of a door-chain being unhasped brought silence, and the knowledge that Addum had received his message from the darkness.

'*La illâha—il Ullâho—bism'-illâh-ur-rahmân-ur-raheem*,' murmured Khôjee under her breath as she sate by the cot trimming the smoky little rushlight. For the cry on Addum had roused Sa'adut from a half-doze and brought opportunity for more paper pellets.

'*Bismillah-ur-rahmân-ur-raheem*,' he echoed in his cracked little voice quite cheerfully; for these words, the assertion that God is a merciful and a clement God, are the Mohammedan grace before meat as well as a prayer, and the four years, four months, and four days, at which age children are taught them as their initiation into the Church, were still close enough to Sa'adut's sum-total of life, to give the repetition a pleasurable importance.

'Heart of my heart! Eye of my eye! Life of my life! murmured old Khôjee again. 'Lo! swallow it down, my uttermost beloved, and sleep.'

She had the child to herself for the moment, since Noormahal at her earnest entreaty had hidden her face altogether in her veil, and, with her head on the foot of the bed, had gone off into a brief slumber of exhaustion. So the old arms and the old lips could show all the tenderness of the old heart, which for nearly seventy years had beat true to every womanly sympathy within those four prisoning walls.

By the light of the rushlight Sa'adut's big black eyes showed bright from the cushions of state. So did the emerald in the ring.

'Why didst not sound the *naubat* to-day, lazy one?' he said suddenly, as if the omission had just struck him. 'Go! sound it now—dost hear? Sa'adut wants it.'

He had not spoken so clearly for days, and Khôjee's smile came swift.

'Nay, sonling, it was sounded,' she answered caressingly. 'Thou didst sleep, perchance. Sleep again, Comfort of my heart! It will come, as ever, at sunset.'

'But Sa'adut wants it now!—he will have it! he will be asleep at sunset. Sound it now! Sound it now, I tell thee, thou ugly one. Sound the King's *naubat* for Sa'adut.'

The old vehemence, the old imperious whimper brought delight and dismay in a breath to the listener.

'Yea, yea, sweetest!' she began breathlessly as the old signs of tears showed themselves—'have patience, pretty. Old Khôjee will surely obey—no tears, darling—she will sound the *naubat* even now.'

She glanced round in her consolations hurriedly. Noormahal still slept at the bed's foot. Khâdjee's snores—she had wept herself into the physical discomfort of a cold in the head—rose regularly from an archway. All else was silence. Every one slept! Even the city! Yes! she would risk it—risk disturbing the neighbours—risk unknown penalties from the breach of unknown by-laws. The child must be saved from tears.

So, hastily, she caught up the rushlight, and leaving the courtyard to the moonlight, stumbled, fast as her limp would let her, up the narrow stairs to the *naubat khana*. The rats scuttled from it as she picked her way through the fallen kettledrums that had once swung from the roof, brave in tassels and tinsels; that were now cracked, mouldering, the parchment rent and gnawed. One still hung dejectedly at the farther end, and towards it she passed rapidly. Even on it, however, a rat, driven to extremities in that hungry house, had been attempting to dine; its eyes showed like specks of light as it ran a little way up the tarnished tinsel rope on which the drum swung, and awaited her oncoming.

Now Aunt Khôjee, like many another woman East and West, was desperately afraid of rats; yet the *naubat* had to be sounded. She shut her eyes to give her greater courage, and put all her little strength into her blow.

It was too much for the rotten rope. The kettledrum clashed to the ground with hollow reverberations worthy of the old days, and the old woman's frightened cry did duty as the *nakârah*.

But behind both sounds came a child's laugh, an elfin, uncanny laugh; and, as she paused—in her flight downwards—at the stair-head, she saw in the moonlight below an elfin, uncanny figure sitting bolt upright among the cushions of state, clapping the little hands that held the glistening signet of royalty, and chuckling to itself gleefully, while Noormahal, roused, yet still bewildered, looked about her for the cause, and Aunt Khâdjee from the archway gave pitiful shrieks of alarm.

'The *naubat*! the King's *naubat*! My *naubat*! Sa'adut's *naubat*!'

The cracked, hoarse little voice went on and on till it became breathless, and after it ceased, the sparkle of the ring still showed in the little applauding hands.

'What is 't?—what didst do?' asked Noormahal reproachfully. 'Thou hast made him in a sweat. Lo! heart's delight, let me wipe thy forehead—'tis only *Amma jân*—thy *Amma*,' she added coaxingly. But there was no need for that. Sa'adut lay cuddled up on his pillows, smiling, complaisant, both hands clasped over his ring.

'Sa'adut's ring,' he whispered as if it were a great joke, a splendid childish secret that was his to keep or tell, 'and Sa'adut's *naubut*. His own. He will keep them himself.'

'Lo! *bibi*,' faltered old Khôjee apologetically—'it will do him no harm. See! it was of himself he rose, and now he would sleep. He is better, not worse. *Bismillah!*'

'*Ur-rahmân-ur-raheem*,' came drowsily from the child's lips, finishing that new-taught grace, asserting that new-found dignity. So, with that look of possession on his face, he fell asleep again.

He was still sleeping when, an hour or two after dawn, the tailor's wife from over the alley came in on her way bazaarwards, to see how the child had fared through the night, and ask what the noise might have been which had awakened her house. Had more of the old palace fallen?

Khôjee, who was already spinning for dear life, set the question by. A great fear was in her old heart, because of the evil portent of the falling drum; but none because of the truth, writ clear on that sleeping figure, that it would never wake again.

So Khâdjee was still writing out the attributes of God, and Noormahal scraping out another dose of the wonderful

western medicine from the bottom of a tin of Brand's essence against the wakening that would never come.

'He is more like his grandfather than his father,' remarked the tailor's wife as she looked at the child. 'If he had been King, he would have been better than Jehân.'

She made the assertion calmly, and though Aunt Khôjee looked up, doubtful of its ambiguity, no one denied or contradicted it. So the tailor's wife passed out of these four walls, leaving them empty of all things strange.

For the very shadows they threw were familiar. All her life long, Noormahal's big black eyes had watched the purple one of the eastern wall lessen and lessen before the rising of the sun, and the purple one of the western wall grow behind the setting of the sun. Only on the angled screen at the door the shadows were sometimes new; these shadows of some one coming from outside.

There was one on it now; clear, unmistakable. No! not one; there were two! The shadows of two strange women muffled in their veils, coming in as if they had the right to enter.

A quick terror flew to Noormahal's eyes at the sight!

The tailor's wife had not been long in spreading her news.

In an instant Noormahal was on her feet fighting the air wildly with her hands.

'It is not true!' she cried passionately; 'it is not true!' And then the mockery of her own denial, the certainty that it was so, came to her even without a look at the child, and her voice rose piercingly in the mother's dirge—

'O child! who taught thee to deceive?
O child! who taught thee thus to leave?'

Old Khôjee was at her side in a second, beating down her hands. 'Not yet! Not yet! Noormahal! Oh! wait a while. It cannot be yet! He sleeps—he is not dead.'

True, he slept still, cuddled into the cushions of state. But the look of possession had gone from the childish face, though the signet of royalty had found its proper place; for it hung loose on the forefinger of his right hand.

'Some one must call his father,' whimpered Khâdeeja Khânum; even amid the tempest of grief she was mindful, as ever, of etiquette. 'He must be here to receive the last breath.'

So it came to pass that when Jehân returned with Lateefa

from cantonments to the evil-smelling courtyard in which his bachelor quarters jostled Dilarâm's balcony, he found the call awaiting him. It had come two hours before, the messenger said, so it might be too late. But it was not.

Jehân entering, found the courtyard half full of women. The sun was pouring down into it, showing the stolid yet watchful faces of the circle of those—unveiled by reason of their lower rank—who were gathered round the bed set in the centre. Khôjee and Khâdjee—the former with the tears chasing each other down her cheeks forlornly as she shaded the child with the royal fan and said '*Ameen*' to the old mullah who was chanting the death chapter of the Koran, the latter with unreserved sobbings—crouched at the head.

But Noormahal neither sobbed nor said '*Ameen.*' Half on the ground, half on the low bed, she lay still, her face hidden about the child's feet.

She did not stir even when Jehân's voice rose in unrestrained—and for the time being sincere—lamentation, in piteous upbraidings of all and everything. Why had he not been told? Why had he not been sent for sooner?

Lateefa, who had entered with him, gave a quick look of absolute dislike and contempt at his principal. 'Best thank God they sent for thee at all,' he muttered as he passed to the head of the cot. He had gibed and laughed at the tragedy till then, treating it—as he treated his kites—as a mere nothingness. But this—above all, old Khôjee's forlorn face—struck home.

'Best thank God they let thee be in time to claim thy son,' he muttered again, adding, as he bent his keen face closer to the child's, 'and thou art but just in time!'

But just in time! Even as he spoke one of the stolid watching women nodded and looked at her neighbour interrogatively. The neighbour looked at the face on the cushions, and nodded also.

So, as if by common consent, the first faint whimper which heralds the true wailing began.

Khôjee paused in an '*Ameen*' with a gasp, Khâdjee let her sobs grow into a cry.

But Noormahal neither stirred, nor uttered sound. Only as she lay over the child's feet a little shiver ran through her limbs as if she, too, were passing from the cold world.

An hour afterwards she was still lying so, face downwards, unregarding, though they had moved her to the bed where Khâdeeja Khânum had spent so many hours in making tinsel caps.

One of them, which she had made for Sa'adut's four years, four months, and four days' reception into the church of the Clement and Merciful, was on the child's head now; for the tenders of the dead had prepared him for his burial.

Khôjee had brought out the few treasures of faded brocade the ruined palace still held, to fold about him softly, and with a sob which seemed to rend her heart, had bidden the signet of royalty be left on the little Heir's forefinger against the time when his mother should rouse herself to take her last look at him.

The wailers had departed to return later on. Khâdjee had succumbed to sorrow, and sought seclusion. Even Jehân had gone; the last to go, save Lateefa, who lingered half-indifferent, half-compassionate, impatient of poor Khôjee's tears over a loss that had been inevitable for months, yet not liking to leave them to be shed in absolute solitude.

'Thou art kind, Lateef,' she said at last. ''Tis woman's work, not man's: yet without thee, brother——' Her soft old eyes met his, and the tears in them seemed to find their way into his heart and melt it.

'Thou art welcome, sister,' he said gravely. 'I think all is as it should be now—I see naught amiss.'

His eyes, as he stood at the foot of the bed whereon the dead child lay, travelled approvingly upwards, and Khôjee's followed suit. But hers went no further than the little waxen hands resting so straightly, so demurely on the brocade; for the lack of something on them made her start forward incredulously, search in wild haste in the folds beneath the still fingers, and then fall with a cry at Lateefa's feet, clasping them, kissing them.

'Give it back—it was there but now! If thou hast it—if he bade thee take it—gave it back!'

He stood looking down at her with a curious expression of shame on his face. 'It,' he echoed. 'What is it?'

'Thou knowest,' she pled piteously. 'The ring—she will die if it is not there. She cannot lose both, she cannot lose all. Give it back for these first days—give it for comfort, if for

naught else, or she will die. O Lateef! do this for old Khôjee—ugly Khôjee! Lo! I have asked naught of men, nor husband, nor child; for I had naught to give. Yet I ask this—have pity—brother!'

He stooped to unclasp her hands with an almost tender look.

'Thy like has more to give mine than thou dost think, sister,' he said; 'God knows even Lateef——' He broke off with a half-impatient gesture. 'But this is past hoping for. If Jehân wishes——' He paused again, and shook his head. 'Tell her thou hast put it by for safety—she will be too full of grief to prove thy words—that will give time, see you——'

Khôjee, still on her knees, looked up doubtfully. 'Time,' she echoed, and then her face lit up with hope. 'Time—then thou wilt try! thou wilt speak to Jehân! thou wilt bring it back if thou canst! Yea, I will tell her—I will tell the lie if thou wilt promise. Lateef! this much thou *wilt* do, promise to try. On the Koran, on thy head, thou wilt swear, if thou *canst* do this thing.'—Her old lips were on his feet, kissing them passionately, and he gave an uneasy, almost bitter laugh.

'Not on the Koran, sister,' he said evasively, 'nor on my head. Those be God's work. Lateef had naught to do with the making of either. He hath no hold on them, or their vagaries, and I swear by naught that is not sure.'

'Then swear by what thou likest,' she put in swiftly. 'Lo! it is not much I ask—not even that thou wilt bring it back, but that thou wilt try—for me who cannot try, for helpless Khôjee shut in these four walls. Promise, Lateef, that if thou *hast* the chance—nay! I will not let thee go till thou dost promise.'

There was a pause, and then he laughed—his own comtemptuous, musical laugh. 'If the chance comes! Yea! I will promise that. On my kites I promise, since they be my creatures to fly or fail as I choose. Let be, good Khôjee. If I am to do aught, thou must let me go.'

She rose reluctantly. 'On thy kites, Lateef? That is a light oath.' She spoke in vague wonder.

'Heavy for me, sister,' he replied gaily, 'since they be all Lateef has for children—all of his own fashioning to leave behind him when he dies!'

So, with a nod towards the dead child, he passed out of the courtyard where the shadows were lengthening for sunset.

But there would be no *naubat* to sound that evening, so Khôjee crouched down between the two beds where the mother and the child lay both silent, both unheeding, and covering her face with her veil, thought how best to tell the lie when Noormahal should rouse to ask the question.

CHAPTER XIII

A VALSE À DEUX TEMPS

'WHAT am I? Why, a mutiny lady, of course. Don't you see my crinoline; I suppose I am the first to arrive, but there are a lot of us coming in the dress. We are going to have a sixteen mutiny Lancers; perhaps two, and all sorts of fun. Rather a jolly idea, isn't it?'

The speaker was Mrs. Chris Davenant as she stood buttoning her white gloves in the anteroom of the club which was all decorated and illuminated for the Service ball. She was daintiness itself in a widespread pink tarlatane frilled to the very waist. A wreath of full-blown pink roses headed the fall of white lace that lay low down on the white sloping shoulders, which seemed as if, at the least movement, they would slip up from their nest of flowers to meet the fair shining hair that slipped downwards in a loose coil from the wreath of pink roses round her head.

The steward who had been told off to record the costumes, and see that no one evaded the rule of fancy dress without permission, raised his eyebrows slightly as he bowed.

'And admirably carried out in your case,' he replied politely, ere turning to Chris, who stood beside the pink tarlatane in the garments of civilisation which had been rescued from Sri Hunumân. He was looking, for him, moody, ill-humoured.

'And you, I suppose, have permission,' began the steward, when Mrs. Chris with a hasty look—half of appeal—at her husband, interrupted gaily—

'Oh, he is mutiny too. The fashion in dress-clothes has not changed.'

'Excuse me,' said Chris in a loud voice. 'I come as an English gentleman of the nineteenth century. It is fancy dress for me, sir. Are you ready, Viva?'

The white shoulders did slip from the lace and the roses

with the half-petulant, half-tolerant shrug they gave, and which expressed, as plain as words could have done, the owner's mental position. If Chris chose to take that line and make a fool of himself, it did not concern her. She meant to enjoy herself.

'Execrable taste!' remarked the steward at the other door whose business was with the ball programmes.

'Which?' asked his neighbour pointedly.

'Oh, both. But the mutiny idea is the worst. Who the deuce started it?'

'Lucanaster's lot, I believe. We couldn't exactly stop it, if they chose.'

'Well, I hope to goodness Filthy Lucre won't come as John Ellison, or I shall feel it my duty to knock him down.'

'Oh, we barred that sort of thing, of course. And it is really rather a jolly dress'—the speaker gave a glance after the pink tarlatane—'at least, she looks ripping in it.'

She certainly looked her best; and had caught the sweetly feminine suggestion of the style better than any other of the score or so of women belonging to the smart set, who, by degrees, came to make up the mutiny Lancers. A fact which the men belonging to it were not slow to recognise, so that a group of stiff-stocked uniforms soon gathered round her, while Mr. Lucanaster—who looked his best, also, in the gorgeous array which Hodson of Hodson's Horse in the middle of all the strain and stress of the mutiny, evolved from his inner consciousness for his 'Ring-tailed Roarers'—could not take his eyes off her gleaming pink and white. He even risked the resentment of more important ladies by rearranging the whole set so as to secure her being next to him in it.

But that gleam of pink and white was responsible for more than the setting of Mr. Lucanaster's blood on fire. It made Chris, for the first time, fiercely jealous. Ever since he had allowed himself, for that minute on the bridge, to compare his wife with his ideal, and his ideal with the little cousin whose familiar beauty had so disturbed him, he had been far more exigeant as a husband than he had ever been before. And now, as he watched his wife's success, it was with clouded eyes that followed her wherever she went; even when, just before supper—the night being marvellously warm for the time of year—some one's suggestion that it would be infinitely

jollier to have the mutiny Lancers outside in the gardens, sent the whole party of dancing feet trooping out, amid laughter and chatter, to the lawns and flower-beds which forty years ago had lain bare and bloodstained under the weary feet of those defenders of the flag.

The verdict of execrable taste given by the steward had been endorsed by many; by none more fully than by the Government House party which had come over late. But even Lesley felt bound to admit that, taste or no taste, there was a certain uncanniness in the look of these men and women who might indeed be ghosts from that gay Nushapore life of forty years back.

So, many a one might have been dressed, so they might have danced, and flirted, and chattered, on the very night when John Ellison ended that gay life and called them to death, with a brief order to close in on the Garden Mound and defend the flag that floated from its central tower. And Grace, more imaginative, more fanciful than Lesley, found her thoughts wandering more than once in a wonder whether some call to show themselves worthy of that past might not come again, come there in the midst of the lights and the laughter. There is always an atmosphere of unreality in a fancy dress ball when the masqueraders mean to enjoy themselves; but it was more marked that night than Grace Arbuthnot had ever seen it.

There was a fascination in it—in the uncertainty of it.

But there was one small soul for whom the sight had fascination, not from its unreality, but its reality. This was Jerry, who in consequence of a special invitation from the ball committee of which Jack Raymond was secretary, that the little lad might be allowed to see the show till supper-time, had been brought over for an hour or two.

'He isn't weally Hodson of Hodson's Horse, is he, mum?' he said, squeezing his mother's hand tight, as, in his little Eton suit, his wide white collar seeming to stare like his wide grey eyes, he watched the couples passing out into the garden, 'cos *he* was bigger. It's only pwetence, weally, isn't it?'

'Of course, it is pretence, Jerry,' she answered almost carelessly; then something in the child's expression made her stoop to smooth his hair, and look in his freckled face with a smile. 'You would like to go and see them in the garden, wouldn't you? Well, wait a bit, and Lesley, when she comes

back from her dance, shall take you, and then you must be off to bed. It is getting late.'

'Let me take him, Lady Arbuthnot,' said Jack Raymond's voice. 'I am engaged to Miss Drummond for these Lancers, and I am sure she would prefer not to dance them with me, even if she hasn't forgotten the fact.'

He had come up behind her from the supper-room where he had been busy, and Grace, who had not seen him before that evening, felt a sudden pang at the sight of him. For he was dressed in the political uniform which, except on such frivolous occasions as these, had not seen the light for ten years. She told herself that he looked well in it, *as he had always done*; and then the reminiscence annoyed her, for she had been taking herself to task somewhat for the persistency of such recollections.

'Thanks so much,' she replied. 'I can see her coming back now, so you can combine the two. That will do nicely.'

It would, in fact, fit in very nicely with her plans; for in consequence of that taking to task she *had* been making plans, as women of her sort do when they feel an interest in a man which they cannot classify. And Grace Arbuthnot could not classify hers for Jack Raymond; though she went so far as to acknowledge that she could not, even now, treat him as she treated all other men with the exception of her husband.

He made her feel moody and restless. This was intolerable, even though the cause was, clearly, nothing more than a regret at his wasted life. It could, indeed, be nothing else. Had she not at the very beginning sought him out solely in the hope of rousing him to better things? He had repulsed her by saying that hers was not the hand to win his back to the plough; and she had resented this at first—had refused to believe that the past could interfere with the present. But she had been reasoning the matter out with herself during the last few days. There had been many links and also many *lacunæ* in the chain of that reasoning; yet she had been quite satisfied with the result of it, namely—a conviction that Lesley Drummond would be the very person to compass regeneration! For women like Grace Arbuthnot are never more inconsequent than they are in regard to Love with a big L; since in one breath they call it Heaven-sent, and the next set springes to catch it as if it were a woodcock or a hedge-sparrow!

Having arrived at this conviction with a curious mixture of shrewdness and sentiment, Grace had gone on to be practical. She herself was debarred by her position from any more becoming dress than the latest Paris fashion, but that was no reason why Lesley should not have the advantage of clever wits and clever fingers. For the girl herself was of that large modern type which, without in the least despising dress, being, in fact, curiously sensitive to its charm, are personally quite helpless concerning it.

The result of this being, that as Lesley approached, Jack Raymond stared at the transformation, took in its details, and finally gave in to the perfection of the dress by saying, with a laugh—

'God prosper thee, my Lady Greensleeves!'

'My Lady Greensleeves!' echoed Lesley. 'Yes, of course it is! How stupid of me, Lady Arbuthnot, not to have guessed before. Oh! I'm sorry; I promised not to tell who made my dress, didn't I?'

The cat was out of the bag, and Grace flushed up with vexation. She had not thought any one would recognise the source whence she had taken Lesley's 'smock o' silk' and 'gown of grassy green,' her 'pearl and gold girdle' and 'gay gilt knives,' the 'crimson stockings all o' silk,' and 'pumps as white as was the milk.' She had not even told the girl herself, partly from the love of such fanciful little mysteries which is inherent in such as she; partly because she feared to injure the unconscious indifference which made Lesley look the character to perfection.

> 'Greensleeves was my heart of gold,
> And yet she would not love me.'

And now Jack Raymond, of all people, had found her out; found her out altogether! She could see that in his eyes, hear it in his voice as he said—

'Whoever made it, it is charming. This is our dance, Miss Drummond, I believe, but Lady Arbuthnot wants us to desecrate the past. I mean,' he went on after a slight pause, 'that we are to take Jerry to see some dreadful people dance the Lancers!'

'There are some pasts which do not admit of desecration,' put in Lady Arbuthnot sharply, 'and that is one of them.'

'Neither to be desecrated, nor forgotten,' he added. 'Come along, Jerry!'

As they passed out into the garden Lesley remained silent. She was conscious once again of not understanding the whole drift of the words which had just been spoken. And this time her temper rose with the certainty that she was mixed up in them; so, after a bit, she frowned and said point blank—

'Tell me, please, why Lady Arbuthnot chose this dress for me. I am certain you know, don't you?'

For a moment he was staggered; then he laughed. 'Why,' he echoed, 'have you forgotten, so soon, that Greensleeves are your racing colours? Bonnie Lesley's colours. I'm not so ungrateful as that, Miss Drummond; but then the money I won on her is next my heart at the present moment. Fact, I assure you; for I always carry my betting-book in my breast-pocket so as to be handy!'

She told herself he was incorrigible; had, in fact, almost gone on to the faint blame—which in a woman's mind covers all possible breaches of the ten commandments—of thinking he was '*not at all a nice man*,' when Jerry, as he had already done more than once, prevented quarrel by such a tight grip on both the hands he held, that alienation seemed impossible to them.

'Oh dear!' he sighed, his wide eyes on the couples that were waiting in front of the Residency for the native infantry band, which had been hastily summoned for the *al-fresco* dance, to strike up. 'I do wish there wasn't any nasty old past to come and make it all make-believe, when it might be real; 'cos it *is* a deader, you know, and we're alive!'

Jack Raymond looked over to the Greensleeves and laughed. 'Sound philosophy, Jerry,' he said. 'If it was real, what would you do?'

Jerry looked round thoughtfully. Beyond the lawns the cemetery gate showed dimly, with Budlu's white figure crouched beside it.

'Kill Budlu, or take him prisoner, I 'spect,' he replied gravely, ''cos the band, you know, *might* be loyal.'

At that moment it crashed into the opening bars of the Lancers with all the go and rhythm which the natives put into dance music.

'You're top!' came one voice; 'No! you are,' answered a second; 'Oh! do begin, some one!' protested another. So, with a laugh, a scramble, a confusion, a dozen or more of dancing feet trod the grass which had grown out of blood stains. But the confusion ended in order, so that the pink tarlatane was in its place to be twirled by Hodson's Horse, and join the clapping of hands which ended the figure.

There was something weird in the sight out there, with the flower-beds set with coloured lights, the Chinese lanterns swinging in the trees, and the shadowy pile of the Residency lying—more felt than seen—with its solitary tower and drooping flag.

'Inside! outside! Outside! inside!' came the reckless gay voices after a time.

In the far-distance a fire-balloon from some wedding in the city, sailed up into the sky above the trails of smoke rising from the torches which outlined the boundary of the Garden Mound. Budlu's figure, watching the graves of heroes, showed closer in, then the band busy with cornets and oboes, and the masquerading figures with that gleam of pink and white among them, watched by Chris as he stood half hidden in the shadow of the ruins.

'Outside! inside! Inside! outside!'

So, with another crash of the band, the endless circle of men and women caught at each other's hands as if in that touch lay all things necessary to salvation.

'Inside and outside,' echoed Jack Raymond grimly. 'Yes! Brian O'Lynn's breeches were comparatively sane. But we are all more or less mad to-night, my Lady Greensleeves. Upon my soul, Jerry, you, as the British Boy, are the only one in the place fit to carry on the British rule! so come along and have some supper, young man, before you go to bed. The champagne is A1—that's my department, Miss Drummond; it's all *I'm* fit for.'

But Jerry, who had let go their hands to step nearer the Residency as if he saw something, stopped suddenly and pointed.

'Mr. Waymond,' he said, in a loud voice, 'who's that?'

'Who's who?'

'Him!'—

The child stood pointing into the shadows, his eyes wide, his whole face expectant.

Jack Raymond caught him up by the arms with a laugh, and swung him up to his shoulder. 'Don't be creepy, old man! — there's no one there,' he said, as he turned back to the club.

But Jerry was insistent. He had seen some one, he protested; and brought in a long tale of what Budlu knew, and every one knew, including his *syce* and his *chuprassi*, to prove that he had. Why! Budlu himself had seen the ghost several days, and it meant something just 'orful bad, for there didn't use to be no ghosts in the Mound except Jân-Ali-shân.'

'I wouldn't let him talk so much to Budlu and that lot, if I were you,' said Jack Raymond, aside to Lesley; 'he takes it too hard, dear little chap.'

'I can't prevent it,' retorted Lesley rather resentfully. 'You see he has to go out and come in through the Mound, and then he is such a favourite. The natives simply worship him. I can't think why.'

Jack Raymond glanced at the sturdy little figure which was now tackling roast turkey and ham in blissful forgetfulness of ghosts.

'I expect they know,' he replied briefly, 'and they are not often wrong.'

The Thakoor of Dhurmkote, at any rate, had no doubts; for an hour after, Jerry—under responsible escort—had been sent home across the Garden to bed, Jack Raymond, having strolled beyond the line of lights and light feet to enjoy a quiet cigar, found the two of them, with an admiring tail—composed of the responsible escort and the old nobleman's retinue—going the round of the batteries, while Jerry explained them solemnly to the old warrior in English.

'And we beat 'em here too, sir; boys like me beat all their biggest men, right here.'

'*Wah! wah!*' chorussed the tail approvingly, while the stern old face melted into smiles, with a '*Suchch mera beta suchch!*' (Truth, my son, truth!)

'Hullo! you young scamp!' said Jack Raymond, coming up; 'not gone to bed yet?—be off with you at once.'

But the Thakoor laid a hand on the arm of authority, not in petition, rather in blame.

'Lo! friend of mine,' he said chidingly, 'why is there no son of thine to match this son of heroes? What hast thou been doing all these years?'

The Eastern reproof of the old for those who leave their duty to the race undone, fell on Jack Raymond's Western ears and held them unexpectedly.

Why had he no son, in whom to live again? The answer could not be avoided—because the woman he loved had jilted him, and he had not chosen——

Not chosen what? To do his duty?

He smiled. 'Lo! friend of mine,' he answered lightly, 'such things are chance. My son might have been a coward.'

But as, after having seen Jerry marched off in the direction of bed, and bidden good-bye to the Thakoor—who was far more sleepy than the child—he strolled on with his cigar, he knew quite well that the excuse was a false one. The thought of inheritance, either of heroism or cowardice, did not enter into the question with Englishmen and Englishwomen as a rule. Marriage was a purely personal matter. There, in fact, lay the fundamental difference between the East and West. That was what made it impossible for the two races—— —— ——

The sound of voices in anger made him pause. He had come back to the verge of lights, to the limit of the dancing feet, and before him rose the ruins of what in the old days had been the hospital. The roof had fallen in, but the marble flooring, raised above the levels outside by a half-sunk foundation of cellars, was still in almost perfect repair. And here, after supper—the *al-fresco* Lancers having proved so great a success—the mutiny group had chosen to improvise a ball-room. Such things are easily compassed in India, where an army of sweepers and servants appear in a moment. Once swept, it needed little garnishing; for the great wreaths of coral bignonia garlanded it from end to end, and even flung themselves across it here and there like rafters. As for lights, a few Chinese lanterns, torn from the trees and swung among the flowers, were sufficient for dancing; and who wanted more? Not these masqueraders, with whom, as the hours grew towards dawn, the fun had become fast and furious. The club-house, indeed, was now almost deserted, except by the line of carriages, and even this was lessening every minute. Supper itself appeared to have migrated to the open during Jack Raymond's stroll, for, to his intense disgust, he saw a table—with champagne bottles showing prominent—behind the flitting forms of the dancers; flitting

unsteadily, unevenly, for they were trying the old valse, and a woman's voice rose above the laughter.

'Oh! do try and remember it is a *valse à deux temps*—you can't help treading on people's toes if you don't!'

Jack Raymond had flung away his cigar at the sight of the table, and was going forward to object, forgetful of those angry voices, when they rose again close beside him.

'I insist on your coming home, Viva!—Mr. Lucanaster, sir, let my wife go!'

'Damn!' said Jack Raymond under his breath. He grasped the situation in a second and saw its hopelessness.

'Go 'way, sir—go 'way,' came in Mr. Lucanaster's voice; 'don't be foolish.' There was a faint elation as well as elision in the words; no more, but it seemed to make them sound more contemptuous.

'Yes; don't be foolish, Chris. I'm going to dance this valse with Mr. Lucanaster. You can go home if you like.'

The woman's voice had the note of defiance in it which means danger; but Chris did not recognise the fact. He had been working himself up to this revolt all the evening, and now, having begun it, he went on in strict accordance to what he had settled with himself was the proper and dignified course to pursue.

'Sir,' he said, drawing himself up and speaking with great deliberation, 'you are a scoundrel, and I shall take the earliest opportunity of allowing you to prove the contrary if you choose. In the meantime, pray do not let us quarrel before ladies. I request you to unhand my wife.'

It was not only a man who laughed, it was a woman; and at the sound Jack Raymond swore under his breath again, and slipped towards the voices.

The gleam of pink and white and the 'Ring-tailed Roarer' must evidently have been sitting out in a small summer-house, where Chris had found them; and Mr. Lucanaster must have risen and tried to pass out with the pink tarlatane, for Chris stood barring the way boldly enough. But that laugh was fatal to him. It brought back in a rush the sense of his own helplessness, his inexperience, and with it came the self-pity which is ever so close to tears.

'Viva!' he began, 'surely you——'

Mr. Lucanaster waved his hand lightly, as he might have waved a beggar away.

'Don't be an idiot, my good man. What the deuce have you got to do with an English lady?—Come, Jennie, this two-time valse is ripping.'

'Excuse me,' said Jack Raymond, stepping forward; 'but Mrs. Davenant is engaged to me. If you don't think so, Lucanaster, we can settle the point by and by, but for the present I advise you not to have a row. It won't pay.'

The assertion varied not at all from that made by poor Chris; but the method was different, and Mr. Lucanaster fell back on bluster.

'You're d—d impertinent, sir; but, of course, if Mrs. Davenant——'

'It will not pay Mrs. Davenant to waste time either,' interrupted Jack coolly, holding out his arm, 'especially as she is so fond of dancing. It has been a capital ball, hasn't it?' he added, as if nothing unusual had occurred, when, with a half-apologetic look at her partner, she accepted the proffered arm, and they passed on. 'A pity it is over, but—*perhaps*—you *may* have others like it. Davenant! if you will find the dogcart, I will take your wife to get her cloak, and I daresay she would like a cup of soup before driving. I know it is ready.'

When they were alone, she tried a little bluster too, but he met it with a smile. 'My dear lady,' he said, 'it only wants a very little to kick Lucanaster out of the club, so please look at the business unselfishly. It is always a pity to risk one's position for a trifle.'

As he handed Mrs. Chris into the dogcart, duly fortified by hot soup, Chris tried to wring his hand and say something grateful, with the result that Jack Raymond felt he had been a fool to interfere, since the catastrophe must come sooner or later.

The sooner the better. It was always a mistake to prolong the agony in anything.

He felt unusually low in his mind, and so, after having waited to the very last as in duty bound, to turn any would-be revellers decently out of the club, he lit another cigar—his first one having been interrupted—and wandered out into the Garden Mound again. Most of the lights were out, only a belated lantern or two swung fitfully among the trees, but a crescent moon was showing, and there was just that faint hint of light in the sky which tells of dawn to

look round and pause. For it was [illegible]
running too. He could see the 'crimson [illegible]
and pumps white as is the milk,' as they [illegible]

'Jerry!' she gasped. 'Where is he? Wh[illegible]

'On ahead somewhere! God knows! I told [illegible]
all mad,' he answered as he ran on. The flowering [illegible]
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CHAPTER XIV

IN THE TOILS

On the evening after the ball, Chris Davenant sat in the pretty little drawing-room of which his wife was so proud, looking helplessly at Lala Râm Nâth, who had come in on business. Yet the helplessness was not due, Chris felt, to anything in Râm Nâth. It was due to himself, to his own actions. The feeling comes to most of us at times; for the story of the man-created monster which turns and rends its creator is as old as the world. It began with the serpent in Paradise, and will only end when humanity, by ceasing to desire that which it has not, ceases to put itself in the power of its own imaginings.

Râm Nâth, however, had not reached this stage of development, and was still supremely satisfied with his creature. 'Surely it is out of the question,' he was saying in the fluent English which came from constant speechifying, 'that in the present crisis, when the eyes of all India are fixed on what we Nushaporites will tolerate, in the event of this plague epidemic supervening, and, alas! bringing in its train inter[illegible] with the liberty of the subjects beyond bearing even [illegible] long-suffering races of India, that you should stand [illegible] us, the recognised defenders of that liberty.'

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[illegible] doing?' he asked indifferently [illegible] Râm Nâth a trifle uneasily. 'So far as [illegible] who form the public opinion of [illegible] definite action seems at present [illegible] course, the presenting of an unbroken [illegible] enemy. At the same time there is

come. He sat down on the step of the granite obelisk, which held on all four sides the close-ranged names of those who had given their lives to keep the English flag flying, and, full of cynical disgust at much he had seen that evening, asked himself if Nushapore was likely to bring such heroism again to the storehouse of the world's good deeds?

Perhaps; but even so, it would have to be something very different from that past story,—something that English men and women could not monopolise. For if, after forty years of government, our rule had failed to win over the allegiance of men—like Chris Davenant, for instance—would not that, in itself, be a condemnation?

And had it won such allegiance? With that scene fresh in his memory, Jack Raymond doubted if it were possible.

Truly the conditions had changed, indeed! As he had said, Brian O'Lynn's breeches were not in it for topsyturveydom!

But with the thought came also the memory of what he had said about Jerry and the carrying on of British rule; and with that came the memory of what the Thakoor had said about the boy.

Dear little chap!

A great tenderness swept through him for the child. And for the child's mother, the woman who had refused——?

The question was not answered.

He started up—incredulous—then set off running, calling as he ran, 'Jerry! Jerry! What on earth are you up to? Jerry! Jerry!'

For in the dimness that was not quite darkness, he had seen a little figure running like a hare between the bushes, a little figure in an Eton suit with a gleam of white collar.

'Jerry! Jerry! you little fool! pull up, will you!' There was no answer, and he had lost sight of the boy; but, as he ran on, the sound of other footsteps behind him made him look round and pause. For it was my Lady Greensleeves running too. He could see the 'crimson stockings all o' silk, and pumps white as is the milk,' as they sped over the grass.

'Jerry!' she gasped. 'Where is he? What is it?'

'On ahead somewhere! God knows! I told you we were all mad,' he answered as he ran on. The flowering bushes, growing thick upon the lawns near the cemetery, hid his quarry; but suddenly, on the double back towards the Residency, the child's figure showed, still running like a

hare. In the light of a Chinese lantern that flared up as candle met paper, his face looked dogged.

'Whoo hoop! gone away! Stick to 'im, sir! stick to 'im—

'For we 'll all go a-'unting to-day! we 'll all go a-'unting to-day!'

trolled a new voice, and two more pairs of running feet joined the chase as Jân-Ali-shân and Budlu appeared from the cemetery.

'What, in the devil's name, is it all about, Ellison,' called Jack Raymond. 'Are we all mad? What is it?'

'The ghost, sir,' called back Jân-Ali-shân, 'thet's w'ot it is. Me and Budlu was watchin' for 'im, for 'e 's bin takin' away my charakter, sir, an' stealin' from the poor an' needy. But Master Jeremiah must a' seen 'im fust, thet 's 'ow 'tis.'

'He was wide awake in his bed when I came in,' panted my Lady Greensleeves, 'talking about wicked men pretending, and I told him to go to sleep—he must have got up and dressed. Jerry! Jerry! Stop! Come back, do you hear!'

She might as well have called to the dead. The child's figure showed on another double, and before him—yes, before him, just rounding another bush was a ghostly figure in a white uniform.

'By Jove!' exclaimed Jack Raymond, ignoring his faint feeling of creepiness. 'There *is* some one. This is getting exciting. Come on! don't let him slip through.'

'Whoo hoop! gone away! Tantivy, tantivy, tantivy!' sang Jân-Ali-shân.

So round the Residency, and back towards the hospital where the *valse à deux temps* had been danced, Lesley, her green sleeves flying like flags, ran blindly, to pull up in a heap among the little group of balked faces, stopped by the wall of the half-sunk cellars below the marble dancing floor. A wall all garlanded down to the ground with bougainvillea and bignonia.

'He 's here! the ghost 's here!' wailed Jerry. 'I sor' him from the window when I was watchin', lest he should pull down the flag. Oh, Mr. Waymond, please catch him!'

Jack Raymond, who was feeling below the trailing-flowers, gave a short exclamation. 'There 's a door here. Have you a match about you, Ellison?'

'Lord love you!' replied the loafer reproachfully, 'I ain't

such a fool, sir, as to go ghost-'unting without a lucifer. Here you are, sir!'

The next instant, beneath the creepers that parted like a curtain, an open door showed in the match light; and in the darkness within was something.—What?—

'What a horrid smell!' said Lesley, as Jack Raymond took a step inside and held up the match.

'Begging your parding, miss,' put in Jân-Ali-shân, 'it's a dead rat, that's w'ot it is—"*once known, loved for ever, oh! my darling.*"'

'Horrid!' echoed Jack Raymond, in rather an odd tone of voice. 'Stand back, and let me close the door; there's no use in any one running the gauntlet of it.'

He had acted on the words before any one could raise an objection, and they could only hear his voice inarticulately from within.

'He's got the ghost!' cried Jerry triumphantly. 'I knew'd he was here. I see'd him all along.'

'Seems a peaceable sort, anyhow,' remarked Jân-Ali-shân, as something like a faint whimper filtered through the closed door.

It was lighter now. The sky had paled. The shadows were turning grey.

That was perhaps why Jack Raymond's face showed so pale, and grey, and stern above his political uniform, as he came out, closed the door behind him, and, flinging down the lighted match he carried, trod it under foot.

'It's only a poor devil of a stowaway,' he said calmly. 'Been living here, I expect, some days. Ellison or Budlu, you'd better go and call the police. Stay, I'll give you a note. And Miss Drummond, it is high time that young ghost-hunter was out of the dew—and you also.'

Lesley looked at him with a new swiftness and light in her eyes. 'Dew!' she echoed, 'there is no dew! I'm not a bit wet—feel that!' She walked deliberately up to where he stood, his back still against the door, and catching her long green sleeve in her hand, held it out.

'I'll take your word for it,' he answered lightly.

She did not move, but her eyes sought his.

'*C'est la peste, monsieur,*' she said in a low voice.

He looked at her for a second.

'*C'est la peste, mademoiselle,*' he replied with a bow.

CHAPTER XIV

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Chris leant his head on his hand wearily. In truth he felt aloof from everything in God's round world, save that old man of the sea whom he had invited, under the name of civilisation, to sit on his shoulders.

'What have you decided on doing?' he asked indifferently.

'Doing?' echoed Râm Nâth a trifle uneasily. 'So far as we ourselves—we, that is, who form the public opinion of India— are concerned, no definite action seems at present necessary; beyond, of course, the presenting of an unbroken front of opposition to the enemy. At the same time there is

much to be done on the sly; I mean'—he interrupted himself hastily at the false idiom—'unostentatiously, in order to gain the mass of the people to our side.'

'Yes,' assented Chris, 'you and I can afford to admit the truth, can't we?—that we are not much nearer to the hearts of the people than the English whom we ape.'

He spoke with a concentrated personal bitterness which brought greater hope and confidence into Râm Nâth's persuasions. 'Undoubtedly. Therefore our duty is palpable. We must seek every sympathy with them that we can legally find. For instance, their admirable desire for religious freedom, their touching devotion to the sanctity of home, their vehement defence of the modesty of their women. All these——'

'Are in the abstract,' put in Chris keenly. 'Let us deal with the concrete, please; it is safer.' He was roused now by pure love of argument; his intellect, to which he had sacrificed so much, had once more asserted itself; the battle of mere words had made him forget his heartache.

They settled down to it with zest, as if it had been a debate. And when Chris, by sheer force of argument, had made his opponent admit that—setting generalities aside—the expressing of sympathy in some details, though expedient, could not be held lawful, they arrived—so far as any conclusion went—at a regular *impasse*; since, even for Râm Nâth, it was far easier to *do* what was logically indefensible, than to *assert* that it was defensible. So, after this incursion into the realms of pure reason, he had to descend from them with a certain petulance.

'But it is idle to wander beyond the pale of practical politics,' he said. 'Even English statesmen consult the wishes of their constituents; and so must we.'

'There is this flaw in the analogy,' interrupted Chris eagerly, with an evident pleasure in the making of a point, 'that, whereas an English constituency chooses its representative, we are self-elected.'

'True, true!' admitted Râm Nâth a trifle loftily, 'though, as Mill points out in his admirable treatise, analogy does not consist in the identity of one thing with another. Still, to avoid further discussion, the question remains whether you will join our organisation.' He drew a paper from his pocket and laid it on the table.

It began: '*We, the undersigned, do solemnly pledge ourselves to uphold and to protect*——'

The list of what was to be so upheld and protected was a long one. Indeed Chris, running his eye through it, recognised most of the first principles of sweetness and light.

'That is practically all,' put in Râm Nâth rather hastily when, the end of the third page being reached, Chris seemed inclined to turn it. 'You have seen enough to grasp our meaning, and decide if you can support us.'

'So far,' began Chris thoughtfully, 'there seems little——' Then, quite mechanically, he did turn the page.

What was written overleaf was in the Sanskrit character, and ran as follows:—

'*And to thee, daughter of Surabhi, framed of the five elements, auspicious, pure, holy, sprung from the sun, source of ambrosia, we vow obedience, reverence, protection. May he be accursed, O Sin Expeller! who curses thee. May all men know that they who kill them that kill thee, are purified.*'

Chris Davenant's finger remained pointed accusingly at the black-lettering, his clear intelligent eyes sought those other eyes, equally intelligent.

'Oh, that!' said Râm Nâth in instant petulant excuse. 'That does not concern you or me. We—I mean our class, the educated class—understand that it does not, and so—so we ignore it. You know, as well as I do, that if we were to avow our real belief on the cow question—if we did not insist on what is virtually, as you very well know, the test point between the orthodox many and the heterodox few, we, the latter, might as well give up our aim of benefiting India, our hope of influencing its masses. It is for this reason that the Arya Somaj, though officered by men like myself, has always professed——' He paused, doubtful of committing himself, even so far; then went on, evasively: 'One has to forfeit some independence of thought in the effort to gain a great end. Is not the whole system of party government—in which, admittedly, individuality must be lost—a proof——'

Chris stood up suddenly; yet, despite the suddenness, doubtfully. 'Party government!' he echoed. 'Let us find out party first, Râm Nâth, and as for that'—his voice and face softened as he pointed again to the Sanskrit lettering—'that cannot be for me—as yet. It may come back also.

God knows! It may become real again like—like other things. Then I will follow gladly. But not now. I will not be driven, as—in time of stress—that might drive me; as it will surely drive you and yours!'

Râm Nâth rose too, vexedly, and put the paper in his pocket. 'We will not be driven. It is knowledge that drives ignorance, not ignorance knowledge. Our harness is ready. We will put it on the right horse, and saddle the ass when the proper time comes, never fear.'

Deadly in earnest as he was, Chris could not forbear a smile; but his despondent gravity was back in a second. 'Not if your hands are tied as they will be,' he answered slowly; 'not if you are in the toils!'

He had felt in them, himself, ever since the night before, and the feeling grew stronger when Râm Nâth left him to his solitary dinner. For his wife, after spending the best part of the day in bed recovering from the fatigues of the ball, had gone out to dine with some friends and go on with them to the dress rehearsal of a burlesque in which she was singing and dancing. She had not taken any notice of last night's quarrel; had, indeed, practically ignored it and said good-night to him—as she passed out to the carriage in her short skirts—with absolute good humour.

So, baffled, helpless, miserable, he sate down conscientiously to the long, set meal, which his wife prided herself was served with as much ceremony as any in Nushapore. He said 'No thank you' in polite English fashion to half-a-dozen dishes, and still the solemn exchange of one clean plate for another went on and on, till he felt inclined to order the servants, with their ill-concealed tolerance of him as the husband of their *mem*, out of the room.

They left him alone, at last, in company with the dessert; but even this was not to his taste. Yet, in a way, he felt hungry. So he rose and went to the sideboard, cut himself a slice of bread, helped himself to some mango pickle, and ate it with relish.

Then the mere fact of this revival of a childish taste, with its bathos, its hopeless triviality, reduced him almost to tears, and he came back to sit before the chocolate *pralines* and French *dragées*, and leaning his head on his crossed arms, give himself up to a dreary amaze.

The house was absolutely quiet. The servants had closed

the verandah doors and gone off to their own quarters. Through the looped *portières* which—as in so many Indian bungalows—hung in the wide arch between the dining and drawing rooms, he could see the latter lit up decorously with a superfluity of pink paper shades. One of the windows opening on to the garden was ajar, and the light from the lamps made the thin split bamboo screen, hung beyond it to keep out the flies, look like solid wood.

But as, after a time, impelled—even in his blank uncertainty regarding all things—to think of going into the drawing-room decently and in order, Chris looked up from his dreary meditations, the solidity of this screen wavered. And he saw the cause. A thin delicate hand was pulling the screen aside so as to see into the room.

'Who is it?' he called at once. 'What do you want?'

'Krishn Davenund,' came a voice. It was a woman's.

'Krishn Davenund,' he echoed stupidly, his heart beginning to throb. 'Well! I am Krishn Davenund. Who wants me?'

The next instant he was standing as if turned to stone beside the table; for the white-clad figure which showed itself, and then came swiftly towards him, was his mother's.

'Mother!' he faltered. 'Why?—what?——'

He paused, feeling there was no reason here, no reason at all in the clinging hands about his knees, in the passionate kisses rained on them regardless of dress trousers, regardless of everything save that here was the son that had been lost, and was found again!

Not so Chris Davenant. With a certain rage he realised, even as he bent over her with tears in his eyes stirred to his innermost soul, that above all this emotion lay a doubt to what he ought to do next; whether he should raise his mother to the chair beside his, raise her to the unaccustomed, or crouch down on the floor beside her, himself, in forgotten fashion. Horrible, hateful thought; yet there it was!

She solved the question herself unconsciously with the dignified humility of Eastern womanhood. 'Sit thou there, son of thy father, master of my widowed house,' she said, 'so at thy feet shall I find son and husband once more!'

Then, in a perfect ecstasy of joy, she lifted her worn, refined face to his. 'Yea! I shall find Krishn, my Bala-Krishna once more! Lo! canst thou forgive thy mother,

child; thy mother who denounced thee, not knowing that thou hadst returned—that thou hadst come back?'

'Come back?' he echoed.

Her face was as the face of an angel over the sinner that repenteth. She reached her thin arm from her shroud, and laid her finger on his lip.

'Hush, child! Let it be forgotten. Let it be as if it had never been. Thou canst tell me, after, why thou saidst no word. Yet Krishn, how could I tell? But for the old *pujâri* who laid the caste mark on thy forehead again, I might never have known.'

He understood then; understood why she had come to him; why that clinging mother's touch was his own once more. Poor mother!

'Lo! Krishn!' she went on, interrupting herself hastily at the look on his face, 'be not angry with me. If thou didst know the tears I have shed since he told me but yesterday! How could I know? And to think I might have killed thee. Say thou dost forgive me!'

'Speak not of forgiveness, mother,' he said huskily, bending to kiss her.

What else could he do? he asked himself. Could he tell her the truth—that he had not come back? Or had he? Or even if he had not, did he not mean to do so? He could not say. He only felt himself in the toils once more.

'Leave the past alone, mother,' he said fondly; 'the present is enough.'

She smiled rapturously for a moment, and then she looked round anxiously. 'Nay, child, not yet. There is thy wife. I must gain her forgiveness too, if mortal woman can forgive one who might have made her widow! But I will lie at her feet, Krishn. I will plead with her. That is why I came hither—to see her—to call her daughter.'

Chris, with those clinging arms about him, Chris, in the luxury of being loved, gave a faint sob.

'She is not here to-night, mother,' he said; 'but fret not: she would forgive thee—even hadst thou made her widow!'

The worn old face looked rebuked, perhaps a trifle disappointed. 'Lo! I have heard ever,' she said, with a regret in her voice also, 'that they are as angels, without jealousy; not as we——'

Here the sight of the dark intelligent face above hers

seemed to come upon her as if it had been her lover's and she a girl. She laid her head suddenly on his knee and laughed, a laugh that held a sob. 'Then I have thee to myself for now, heart's darling!' she murmured—'thou and thy house!'

She looked around her, full of childish curiosity and amazement. 'Thou art *Ameer*, indeed!' she went on with awe, touching the tablecloth gingerly with her fingers, 'and all those dishes!' She shook her head dismally. 'Lo! Krishn! how shall I ever feed thee when thou comest to our poor house? Yet wilt thou not mind,' she added; 'thou wert never a greedy one!'

Then the curiosity prevailed even over her thoughts of him, and clinging to his arm still, she raised herself to peer over the table at the drawing-room through which she had hurried.

'Thou dost eat here, and sleep there,' she suggested. 'Nay! Krishn, think not thy mother a fool; but she is so glad—so glad—and all is so new—it is a spectacle!'

Her familiar face, so austere now in its lines, yet still so full of life, furrowed by late tears, yet smoothed by present smiles, seemed to him the most charming thing of his very own he had seen for years. He rose like the boy he was in reality, and raised her with him. 'Come, little mother,' he said in banter. 'Come, feminine one, and see it all; there will be no peace for talk till that is over.'

It came naturally to him, that tone of superior affection which he had not dared to use for so long. So, hand in hand, he showed her things strange and new; and as he did so, saying that Viva had made this or arranged that, a certain content in the fact grew up in him.

'Doth she play this?' asked the widow in her shroud, as she touched the keys of the piano with an awed finger.

'Yea, and sings too,' he replied proudly. 'She shall sing for thee next time'—he had quite forgotten realities in this present—'and now,' he added, 'thou must see the rest, for we sleep not here. This is but for sitting.'

He took one of the pink-shaded lamps and led the way. 'This is my room,' he said with (considering the circumstances) a perfectly childish pomp and delight in his task.

His mother looked into the slip of a room with approval, until she came to the little camp-bed set in a corner.

'Are there no flowers?' she asked quickly: 'the wedding is not so old yet——'

The pink-shaded lamp trembled suddenly in his hands. He had remembered realities. 'And this—this is—the other,' he continued, passing on.

The old woman gave a cry of pure delight; for there were flowers here. Roses on the walls, the hangings, the floor; roses fastening up the lace curtains of the glittering bed, with its quilt of satin; roses even on the dressing-table, trimmed like a rose itself, where Chris, with a still unsteady hand, set down the rosy light to sparkle on the silver brushes and combs, the silver-topped Heaven-knows-what, that lay upon it. For Mrs. Chris had been dressing for a burlesque, and had required plenty of paints and pots!

The old woman, in her widow's shroud, stole over towards it, walking softly as if afraid of crushing the roses. But there was no awe in her face now; only a vast curiosity, as one by one she lifted the lids and looked in. For *this* she knew, *this* was common to all women.

Suddenly she glanced round at her son, and nodded archly ere proceeding with her inspection.

'Yea! She is good, and thou art blessed in one who careth for thy love,' she said softly.

Poor Chris!

He stood staring at his mother, staring at the paints and patches, staring at everything feminine in this world and the next, without a word, without almost a thought.

Only with a sort of vague wonder if this—this inconceivable position—was the common ground between those things feminine?

A sniff at a silver-topped bottle of White-Rose scent ended the inspection by bringing a sudden recollection, a sudden new interest to his mother's face.

'Lo! I had nigh forgotten,' she said, searching in the folds of her shroud with some trepidation, then relieved, coming towards him. 'Naraini—thou dost remember thy cousin Naraini, Krishn, though she was but a child when thou didst leave?'—

'Yea, I remember,' he said, his bewilderment passing into something tangible, something that sent him hot and cold, that made him clinch his hands and try to bring the dull surprise back again. 'What then?'

'The girl hath a fancy—Didst thou, by chance, seek our house that morning, Krishn? I tell her it could not be, that thou wouldst not have gone away, but girls' fancies are ill to soothe; and she hath wept all night lest by her petulance she had driven thee forth. She did penance for it, poor child, within the hour, for having shown evil temper to a holy one; but since the *pujâri*'s tale, she will have it that it was thou—So I gave my word I would ask thee, just to comfort her, though it is idle——'

Chris stood quite still.

'It is not idle,' he replied in a set voice, 'I—I begged of her——'

His mother gave a horrified exclamation. 'And she did fling the corn in the gutter! The Gods are good that worse did not come of it! The wicked one! For this I might have killed my son; for hadst thou come in, I would have known——'

'I was not coming in,' said Chris, reverting to a Western quickness of speech, 'tell her that, please, *Amma*.'

His mother pursed up her lips. 'I have a mind not; as I have a mind not to give thee what she sent.'

'What she sent?' echoed Chris hotly. 'Give it me, mother, give it at once!'

One corner of the shroud came out from the folds obediently. It was knotted round something small and scented; and—even through that shroud—the perfume of roses drifted from it into the rosy room.

'Lo! there it is—that, and her sense of sin. She hath done penance, as I said, but she shall do ten more or ever I return!'

It was only a little round cardboard box she put into his hand; a box with a quaint domed lid such as girls keep their trinkets in, but it was covered and lined with brocaded silk that must have been soaked in *attar* from the scent it held, and that somehow suggested the scented fingers which had sewed on the silver and gold twists, the little pearls and crystals, with which it was so cunningly adorned. Chris had seen such caskets often in the days when he had gone to weddings with his mother; they were part of the bride's trousseau, made always by the bride herself.

And this one Naraini had made. He opened it with a strange mixture of fear and hope: fear lest it might contain

something to spoil that picture of the girl his memory held, and that held his fancy; hope that it might hold something to enhance it.

And it did. For it was full of golden corn, such corn as she had thrown in the gutter at his feet.

He sat looking at it long after he had returned from seeing his mother safe back to the city. He sat looking at it until the rumbling of carriages outside told him his wife would soon be coming from the burlesque. Then he took the pink-shaded lamp again, and put the little box away in his room, in a drawer where there was already a little packet of yellow corn. And, as he did so, he felt that he was in the toils indeed.

The sound of his wife and Mr. Lucanaster's voices as they bade good-night to each other in the garden did not tend to lessen that sense.

But, in truth, that feeling of being enmeshed was not peculiar to Chris Davenant, even in Shark Lane.

Râm Nâth himself, as he finished an article which was to appear in the *Voice of India*—an article which he wrote coolly, calmly, with a certain pride in its even balance of thought, and then deliberately interspersed with glowing periods of pure passion for the sake of his audience—felt as an engineer might feel who knows that the pressure on a throttle valve is getting beyond the escape he can give it, and knows also that he cannot stop the stokers from putting on more coal. He comforted himself, however, by thinking, what was indeed the truth, that he was actually doing no more than many a party politician does in England. The difference lay in the environment: the difference of throwing matches into a fire which burns rubbish, and the throwing of them into rubbish which turns to fire.

Then Mr. Lucanaster, even as he told Mrs. Chris tenderly that he had had what he called 'ripplin' time' in her company, and that he meant to dream of it, knew that before he granted himself the luxury of sleep, he must think over more important matters than his relations with her, and find out how far he had committed himself in regard to them.

For he had been taken by surprise that day. Without a word of warning, the detectives had consulted him, as an expert in pearls, regarding the four found in Miss Leezie's house. As usual when taken aback—for he was not a villain

of the first water—he had temporised with the question. Second thoughts, however, had shown him that by failing at once to admit that he held the remainder of the string for Jehân, he had tied his own hands from doing so in the future. Therefore, if the latter was called upon to produce them, he had only two alternatives. He must either deny possession, or yield it before that possession was publicly asserted at all. In either case he lost his hold on the emerald. So, partly for this reason, partly because he was not prepared to go to the extremes of villainy, he felt that he regretted having touched the business at all.

Jehân himself, however, had no conception that his position in regard to Mr. Lucanaster had altered, except by his own possession of the ring. The presence of that on his finger, indeed, would have given him perfect confidence, but for the fact that it brought with it a strange recrudescence of responsibility. Jehân with the ring and Jehân without it were two different men. He found himself, even as he wept —and he did weep copiously and openly over little Sa'adut's loss—thinking of another heir, of vague possibilities and powers. His very determination to mete out proper punishment to Sobrai grew in dignity; the necessity for it became more of a duty, less of a revenge. And all this made him defer, till the last minute, any communication with Mr. Lucanaster. Time enough to let him know that the ring was really within reach, when the police should ask for the production of the pearls. That might be never; and then, indeed, Jehân felt he would be free to make bargains. Meanwhile, the safest place in which to keep the treasure, seeing that for all he knew Noormahal might have discovered its abstraction, and set her agents to recover it, was his own finger. So there it remained day and night.

But Noormahal had not discovered her loss. Khôjee had told her lie all too well for any doubt in the poor bewildered brain, which had more than it could compass in the hopeless effort to realise that Sa'adut was dead and buried. For the memory of that first day, when they had roused her at the last, and she had sate clutching at the little swathed bundle of white and gold till they took it from her, had happily gone from her also. She still lay, for the most part, in a stupor. Lateefa saw her so, when—the etiquette of a mourning house making it inconvenient for him to continue his trade of kite-

making in the wide outer courtyard—he had gone to take away his materials. But Khôjee had told him it was not always so; that sometimes the Nawâbin had paroxysms of grief, for which there could be, there never had been, but one remedy. And that was a most precious essence compounded out of the sweetest flowers in a King's garden. In the old days it had always been ready in the palace; but now whence was a poor old woman to get '*khush-itr*'? that 'essence of happiness' which cost God knows how many times its weight in gold! As it was, she had gone the length of pawning Khâdjee's best pink satin trousers on the sly, in order to get cheaper specifics; and somehow or another, those precious garments must be redeemed before the mourning-parties began, or Khâdjee would die of chagrin also. Then there would be no one left, since even he, Lateefa, was going. She spoke, as ever, without a suspicion of blame, and when she hoped he had not forgotten his promise regarding the ring, her voice was an apology in itself.

Lateefa, as he went out under the gateway with its plaster peacocks, told himself that he almost wished he could forget. As it was, the green gleam on Jehân's finger kept him on the strain in a quite unexpected way. He never saw it but Khôjee's kind wrinkled face, and her appeal for old Khôjee, ugly Khôjeɐ, came back to his mind with a curious compelling force.

As he sat, afterwards, in one corner of the tiny square of courtyard that was set round, like a well, with high brick walls, where Jehân and Burkut were playing *écarté* with an intolerably dirty pack of cards, each crouched on the same string bed (which also served as a table), he could not help watching that gleam, and thereby imperilling the perfect balance of some kites he was fitting with their tails. For there was a notable series of matches to be flown that evening, and the side-way sweep of a real kite overhead warned him that there would be wind. Wind sufficient to warrant a trifle of ballast, perhaps, to these light creatures of his. He had one afloat already, on trial, just above the top of the houses, where, gay in the sunlight, it hung tilted to leeward almost motionless. Lateefa tested the strain on the cord with a finger, as if it had been a violin string, and as he did so his high trilling voice warbled over one of those ingenious versicles that are more of a puzzle than of poetry—

seeing that almost every letter in them has a mathematical value—which the idle in India love to turn and twist.

'Lateefa made of naught, made thee of naught,
Lateef who never sought the life God brought,
Lateef who 's bound and caught in right and ought,
But *he* forbids thee naught, since thou *art* naught,
Sail east, west, south, or north, choose thine own port!
Thou thing of naught!'

Jehân swore under his breath; the cards were against him. The stakes laid on the bed between him and his adversary had taken his last available rupee; and, of late, even Burkut had refused to play without money down. He looked round sullenly, then turned again to shuffle the pack.

'My nakedness against thine,' he said gruffly; 'the clothes are worth a gold *mohur*, I'll warrant.'

That was about it, since they were both dressed in the ordinary white garments of nobility at its ease.

Burkut shrugged his shoulders. 'If it please thee—as we sit, then. 'Tis thy turn to deal!'

Lateefa looked up quickly from his work. 'The Nawâb will deal better without the signet of royalty,' he said significantly, and as Jehân paused, Burkut frowned and laughed at the same time.

'Yea!' he said airily, 'that would fetch more than a gold *mohur* if 'twere sold. Take it off, my lord.'

'I will do what I choose without thy bidding,' retorted Jehân haughtily, as he drew the ring from his finger and laid it for safety just behind him on the string bed.

Lateefa could see it plainly as the cards fell from Jehân's hand; cards that were in his favour; so much so that he could not avoid a triumphant smile.

The game seemed his, but he played a false card and lost a point.

He dashed the tricks down with such force that the springy plaited twine recoiled from the blow; recoiled and sprang up again.

Lateefa could see the green gleam more clearly than ever now, for the ring lay in the dust within reach of his hand. It had jumped from the bed, like a clay pigeon from a trap,

under that petulant blow. But the players had not noticed it, they were going on with their game unconcernedly.

Only Lateefa's eyes were on that gold and green, half hidden in the dust!

'*If thou hast the chance.*' He heard the words as plainly as if Khôjee had been beside him.

But this was no chance. The loss would be discovered in a minute or two. And then it would be a mere question of search; for there could be no suspicion of any one else, since the bed on which those two were playing was set right across the only entrance to that well of wall in which there was no place of concealment—none!

No! it was not a chance!

Yet he heard his reply now—

'*On my kites I promise; since they be my creatures, to fly or fail as I make them.*'

On his kites! . . .

A sort of dazzle came to the sunshine, a dazzle to his brain. He gave a sudden reckless laugh, his hand went out to the ring swiftly, and busied itself still more swiftly as he sang, in the varying measure to which such versicles lend themselves, a new version of the old words—

'Lateefa made of naught,
Lateef who 's bound and caught;
Lo! he forbids thee naught,
Sail east, west, south, or north!
Choose thine own port!'

The kite which—as he sang—twisted and twirled upwards from his dexterous throw, seemed at first as if it was uncertain what to choose.

'I mark the king!' said Burkut with an oily smile, and once more Jehân with an oath flung down the cards.

But by this time both kites were tilting steadily to leeward, and only Lateefa's skilful finger could, in striking the strings that held them captive, have told that one had a trifle more ballast to carry than the other.

CHAPTER XV

THE RÂM RUCKI

JACK RAYMOND'S admission, '*C'est la peste, mademoiselle,*' had been made under compulsion. Lesley, he had recognised, was not one to be put off by evasion; and yet his first impulse had been to keep his discovery to himself. For the sense of authority to deal with men and things, which he had had in the past, was apt to return to him when he found himself in a tight place. Therefore, the necessity for avoiding a scare had seemed to him paramount, and he had followed up his low-toned admission by a rapid request that Lesley should take Jerry home to bed, and say nothing to anybody of the adventure.

But by the time the green sleeves had disappeared, obediently, over the dim lawns that were just becoming visible in the dawn, his sense of responsibility had passed.

He told himself it was none of his business and that once he had handed over the case to the police, the matter would be ended so far as he was concerned. So far, also, as every one was concerned, if the authorities had any sense; since Lesley would hold her tongue, Jerry's ghost could be laid and laughed at, Budlu bribed, and Jân-Ali-shân——

He looked round, wondering if the latter had gone or not, but could see nothing. An elaborately conscientious hawking and spitting, however, from the shadow of a distant bush, told him not only that John Ellison was there, but that he had grasped the situation.

''Ave a quid o' bitter yerbs, sir,' came the loafer's voice resignedly. 'It 's a camphor bush, sir, an' there ain't no good in givin' in to plague an' pestilence without a

"Good Lord deliver us."

Is there, sir?'

The question had an almost pathetic apprehension in it.

'Not a bit,' assented Jack Raymond. 'Have a cigar instead, Ellison. I'll light one for you and chuck it over.' He knew his man; knew that without being a coward he was for the moment desperately afraid. Two very different things; since time cures one, and the other is persistent.

So for a minute or two there was silence. Then from the shadow of the camphor bush came a more confident cough.

'If you did 'appen to 'ave a drop o' brandy,' began the voice tentatively, 'though if you 'aven't, sir, it's "Thy will be done!" An' that bein' so, there's nothin' left but w'ot the nation you an' me's got to do next? 'Ow many corpses is there, sir?'

Jack Raymond smiled, feeling he had judged his man rightly.

'There is only the poor devil we chased left alive,' he answered; 'the two children, the woman, and a servant are dead. They have been there nearly a week. Refugees from down country who managed to slip past quarantine. He is a Nushapore man by birth, and, just as they were coming to the journey's end, one child fell sick. So, to escape inspection, he alighted at the last roadside station and walked in at night. He had to pass the Garden Mound, of course, and it struck him it would be safer to find out first if his people would take him in. So he, knowing the ropes, hid his family here for the day. Then his people were alarmed, another child sickened, *et cetera*. So he stopped on here, getting to and from the bazaar for what he wanted at night, dressed in an old white uniform——'

A low whistle came from the camphor bush, and a murmur, 'No, you don't, sonny! No, you don't!'

'Yes! it was rather a 'cute dodge, but he's an educated man. Well! the last child died yesterday, and he went off to get medicine for his wife, hoping to sneak back as usual. But the garden was full up with Chinese lanterns and bands; and they were dancing——'

'Deary dear!' interrupted the distant voice sympathetically, 'so 'e 'ad to lounge around, awaitin' for "Gord save our gracious Queen" to let 'im see if 'is lawful wife 'ad chucked it! Well, sir, black or white, it do seem cruel 'ard'—there was a pause, another ostentatious clearing of the throat—'but 'e knows the worst now, sir,' went on Jân-Ali-shân, 'so

why not 'ave the pore soul out

"where the breezes blow,"

on 'is parallel, as the sayin' is? It 'ud be more 'olesome, special if 'e's got to be took in 'and. As it say in 'Oly Writ,

"Separate ye the livin' from the dead an' the plague was stayed."

Beg pardin', sir, but 'avin' bin seven year in a surplus chore, it come natural-like.'

Jack Raymond thought that it did; thought, as he sat waiting, that the loafer, given a free hand, would probably settle the business as well as any one else. His suggestion was sound, anyhow. So, after a bit, there were three shadowy figures planted out on the lawns at respectful distances from each other. The last one, a dejected heap, huddled up on the grass, whimpering softly.

'If you 'ad another o' them hanti-microbber-tail-twisters about you, sir,' came the suggestive voice between vehement puffings at a cigar, 'it 'ud tickle 'im up, like as it done me. An' bein' a Bombay duck, as the sayin' is, 'e'd smoke 'is grandmother's curl-papers! I know them down-country *baboos*. "Week in, week out, you can 'ear their bellows blow." An' "Gord save our gracious Queen" 'as bin cruel 'ard on 'em, sir—to say nothin' o' its bein' a sight safer to pizen 'is bla'ck-sill'ys.'

Jack Raymond smiled. Jân-Ali-shân was wisdom itself. So the further shadow was supplied with a cigar, while a comparatively reckless voice hummed cheerfully—

'Tobacco is an Indian weed,
Grows green at morn, cut down at eve;
Thus we decay, we are but clay,
Think of this when you smoke tobacco!'

'Seems to me, sir,' it broke off at last to say, 'that there's only us three to take count on, so to speak. Them pore things in there 'as sum-totalled up their little bills. An', as the minister's man said when they come worryin' round for a grave, an' 'e busy plantin' sprouts—"Corpses 'll keep an' kebbiges won't!" so why not leave 'em comfortable for to-night? We don't want no crowd comin' round to see the place where we laid 'em, do we, sir? An' Madam Toosaw's

ain't nothin' to bazaar folk for the chamber o' 'orrers if they get the chanst. Then as for 'im, pore devil, 'e *must* go to quarantine camp as a suspect anyhow, so it wouldn't make any odds to 'im, would it, sir? An' we could tell 'im to 'old 'is tongue or worse befall, couldn't we, sir? An' that 'ud tone down the colour a bit, as the sayin' is, more nor lettin' the police send round the town-crier.'

'How about Budlu?' asked Jack Raymond tentatively; but Jân-Ali-shân was ready for him.

'Give 'im in charge 'isself, as 'e ought ter be, for disrelic-tion o' duty in allowin' ghosts. That 'ud stop 'is mouth, sir; special as 'e don't know nothin'.'

The simplicity of the plan was obvious. It would even, Jack Raymond felt, take the responsibility of informing the police off his shoulders. He need only give the stowaway in charge, then go round to the civil surgeon, tell him the truth, and leave him to decide whether or not to hush up the matter absolutely—as he could easily do by the aid of quicklime and a few stones.

'In that case,' he said, after a pause for deliberation, 'the sooner we move off from this particular place——'

'Just so, sir!' interrupted Jân-Ali-shân. 'Dro'r the enemy's fire h'off the weak spot. So, if you'll take 'im over to the general's 'ouse, an' settle 'is an' Budlu's 'ash when the perlice come, I'll 'ang round about them pore things inside, an' warble 'ymns an' psalms an' spiritooal songs till you've done the job. It won't 'urt 'em, sir,' he added apologetically, 'an' it'll kinder keep up my sperits.'

It appeared to do so, for when, a quarter of an hour afterwards Jack Raymond, after finishing his task, returned to that part of the garden on his way to the civil surgeon, he heard quite a cheerful version of 'Wrap me up in my tarpaulin jacket' coming from the camphor bush. And when, just as the sky was primrose with the first sunbeams, he returned once more to release Jân-Ali-shân from his voluntary lyke-wake, he found him seated on the plinth of the mutiny memorial going methodically through 'John Brown's body,' as sung by convivial parties, with the elision of a word at each verse.

It was near its end, so that only 'John' had to be vocalised when Jack Raymond came up; but the beating of the silent tune went on vigorously while he told Jân-Ali-shân that the

civil surgeon had expressed his entire approval of the plan, which he characterised as a stroke of administrative genius!

'"But 'is soul goes marchin' on!"' burst out Jân-Ali-shân, finishing his song at the proper beat. Then he rose, pulled his sleeves over his cuffs, and nodded his head gravely. 'That 's 'ow it is, sir. 'Is soul goes marchin' on. That sort o' strokes come to a feller, they do, in the Garding Mound, an' will do, please God, as long as there's a white face among the black.'

So, singing 'Silver threads among the gold,' he sloped off through the cemetery, then over the wall to his work citywards, feeling that, so far as he was concerned, the incident was over.

But to Jack Raymond, as he went back to the club, came the remembrance that Lesley Drummond must be told that her question and his answer were to remain a secret between them. The idea annoyed him, all the more so because of the remembrance of Grace Arbuthnot's guilty face when Lesley had let the cat out of the bag concerning the origin of the green sleeves! Nevertheless, it was inevitable, so he sat down in an ill-humour, wrote a stiff explanatory note suggesting that Jerry's midnight chase should be treated as a nightmare due to turkey and ham, and sent it over to Government House. Yet, before doing so, he fumigated it carefully with tobacco, feeling the while a trifle ashamed of his own smile at the remembrance of those green sleeves.

But the wearer of them, restored to the dignity of a tailor-made coat and skirt, receiving the note while the tell-tale odour was still fresh on it—for she had found sleep impossible—frowned at the recollection of the figure in the political uniform which had refused even to touch those green sleeves. Frowned, not from displeasure, but from impatience at her own sense of pleasure in his thoughtfulness; for it was unfamiliar to her, that sense of rest in another person's care.

Treat it as a nightmare! Of course! How else could one treat that wild medley of green sleeves, political uniforms, ghosts, boys, *valses à deux temps*, Jân-Ali-shâns!

Only, no sane person would ever dream of dreaming such nonsense!

And yet, what was this unfamiliar tingle to her finger-tips, this curious elation, this sense of personal gain, as if she had

found something new and precious—as if a child, idly unfolding a flower-bud, had found a fairy at its heart?

She turned from this fancy still more impatiently, resolving to set the whole incident aside. But this, she soon found, was quite impossible. That secret between her and Jack Raymond was inexorable in its claims. For instance, though the chance of any consequence to him was, she knew, small, she could not avoid watching for his figure to show in its usual haunts, listening if his name came up in conversation. Neither could she avoid relief at the certainty that nothing evil had befallen him. That, of course, was only natural; but it was intolerable that the relief should make her blush! Most intolerable of all when he noticed it and said, with a smile—

'No such luck for my friends, Miss Drummond!'

This happened at a tea-picnic which Lady Arbuthnot gave a day or two after the ball. More than one person had remarked to her on Jack Raymond's failure to put in an appearance. It was growing late. She was conscious of her own anxiety. And then, in a sudden surge, the blood flew to her face at the sight of him, close beside her, shaking hands with his hostess.

'What is the joke, Lesley?' asked Grace Arbuthnot quickly, looking from one to the other.

Once again Jack Raymond answered for her; answered audaciously.

'A dead secret, even from Lady Arbuthnot, is it not, Miss Drummond?'

'I would rather it was not,' she replied, turning away resentfully to wander off by herself into the garden where the tea-picnic was being given; a garden which had been the '*Petit Trianon*' of the dead dynasty.

It was a quaint place, tucked away between two angles of the city wall for greater convenience in secret comings and goings to secret pleasures; and it was all the quainter now because of the Englishwomen sipping tea on the steps of the gilded summer-house, the Englishmen calling tennis scores in what had been the rose-water tank, in which kings' favourites had bathed, and on which they had floated in silver barges. The feeling of mutual incredibility, which in India comes so often to all but the unimaginative, came to Lesley, as she thought of the city so close behind the

fringe of tall blossoming trees, yet so absolutely hidden by it.

Within half a mile of her lay the courtyard where Auntie Khôjee was starving herself in the effort to get money wherewith to buy the essence of happiness; within half a mile of her Lateefa's kite, overlooked in the tornado of wrath which had followed on the disappearance of the ring, still tilted to leeward under the burden of sovereignty. But of all this—of the romance, the squalor, the humanity of the lives lived in the city—she knew nothing, except her own ignorance of those lives. That, and that only, was with her in the beauty of the garden; the beauty which was, as it were, the only thing that she and the unseen city had in common.

And it *was* beautiful, bosomed in those blossoming trees that shut out the world, shut in the scent of the flowers. It appealed instantly to something deep down in her woman's nature; for this had been a woman's garden!

The remembrance made her recoil spiritually. Partly from the thought of what the garden must have seen in the past, partly from the mere suggestion that it could appeal to anything in *her*. She walked on quickly, recoiling bodily, as she did so, from an overgrown rose-shoot which usurped the path. In so doing she displayed frills and flounces, a pair of dainty open-worked stockings and high-heeled shoes. But she did not recoil from the sight of these. Despite her views, despite her modern girl's theoretical contempt for *chiffons*, and disdain for women whose lives are bounded by the becoming, she was not one whit more logical on such points than her grandmothers had been. She had not thought out the real meaning of her frills and furbelows, or confessed to herself that such feminine footgear belongs inevitably to the path which leads to the '*Petit Trianon*' of life.

Above all, she had not seen, as women must see before they become a power in the world, that the one point on which all races meet, no matter what their religion, no matter what their ideals, no matter what their standard of morality, is that which makes '*Petit Trianon*' possible. In other words, the woman's attitude towards the man; an attitude so strangely at variance with the sex-laws of nature.

Yet of the beauty of this garden who could doubt? Within

that fringe of blossoming trees, a wide aqueduct—like a shining cross—lay, edged by mosaicked marble causeways, that were raised above and in their turn edged by a perfect wilderness of flowers. And this wider cross, composed of flowers, mosaic, water, was set in dense thickets of oranges and pomegranates. In this late afternoon all the sunshine seemed concentrated in the cross. Great shafts of yellow light streamed down its limbs, seeming to darken all the rest. In the centre where the limbs met, a group of fountains sent fine feathers into the air, and through their sparkle the gold and marble of the summer-house gleamed amid its sentinels of cypress, at the far end of the garden. There was a cloying sweetness in the air. A flight of jewelled parrots flew screaming from one screen of flowering trees to the other, as if even they—winged creatures as they were—could not escape the thraldom of those high walls, hidden by leaf and blossom.

That sense of prisonment—the prisonment of pleasure—lay heavy on Lesley as she paused, half-unconsciously, before a tiny latticed retreat—the daintiest little retreat in the world—which, just at the opposite end of the shining cross from the gilt summer-house, rose out of the water. Made of marble fretwork, with a domed top, it looked like a lace veil moulded into the form of a singing-bird's cage; and its latticed seclusion was only connected with the causeway on either side of it, by a foot-wide ledge of mosaic.

Lesley, having been in the garden before, knew the purpose this retreat had served in the past, and her involuntary pause beside it prolonged itself in half-disdainful wonder. For this had been the sanctuary. Here had been refuge even from the pleasures of the garden, and hither, if any woman, high or low, chose to appeal for redress, majesty itself had been bound to come and listen, leaving majesty and manhood behind it.

That, at least, was the idea. The retreat itself was more suggestive of beauty gaining in power by seclusion; and Lesley's lip curled with more disdain as she looked at the finnikin filagree cage.

Her expression, however, changed to curiosity as she realised that some one was sitting inside it. She crossed the ledge of mosaic swiftly, and, stooping under the laced edge of a low arch, went in.

It was not beauty that she found. It was a wrinkled anxious-faced old woman, who rose in a *salaam*, then literally prostrated herself at the girl's feet. Lesley had been long enough in India, now, to judge rightly of the poverty shown in the dress. The blue-striped trousers, tight to the knee and full above, the short whity-brown cotton veil were to be seen—more or less dirty, more or less ragged—in every poor Mohammedan quarter. Yet there was something refined in the worn face, blurred with recent tears, which looked into hers apprehensively, as the owner rose to *salaam* again, leaving a small roll of paper bound with coloured silks upon the marble floor.

Lesley was puzzled for an instant; then it flashed upon her that this must be some belated petitioner for justice in the old style, who had heard, probably, that the Lord-*sahib* was in the garden. Such rolls of paper—without the silken tie, however—were often thrust into the carriage when Sir George was in it.

So she hunted round her sparse vocabulary, but finally fell back on the first phrase most newcomers to India learn, namely, '*Kya mankta?*' (what do you want?)

It is an admirable beginning, though, unfortunately, the sympathetic curiosity of it seldom becomes impersonal to the speaker! It produced another *salaam*, and such a flood of polished speech that Lesley retired to English incontinently. 'Is it for the Lord-*sahib*?' she asked hurriedly, picking up the roll and pointing with it to the distant summer-house.

The title produced a fourth *salaam*, and Lesley, with some relief, stooped under the fretted arch again, and began to retrace her steps towards the others.

Sir George, she knew, had been doubtful if business would allow him to put in an appearance at the entertainment at all; but some one would be sure to know what message ought to be sent back to the petitioner, who, as Lesley left the bird-cage, settled herself down in it again to wait, with great precision.

'Read it, some one, please!' said Lady Arbuthnot, after she had undone the quaint little tasselled silk cord which was fastened with a loop and button round the roll of paper.

But the order was no such easy matter to obey. So far as the conventional '*Arz fidwe yih hai*' (This is the request of

your petitioner) went, the little group of administrators who responded to her request were fluent enough. After that came complaints of the character, and more than one suggestion that only a regular native reader could be expected to decipher such writing, and that it would be best to hand the document over to the office, which would be sure to make something of it,—a remark which made Lesley, who was listening, wonder whether the accuracy of that something was to be considered at all!

Grace Arbuthnot, however, listening also, let a curious smile come to her face; a smile that gave it an unusual tenderness. 'Where is Mr. Raymond?' she said suddenly. 'Going, did you say? Will some one call him back, please!'

He appeared, ready for his drive home in rather a violent blazer, and once more there was that unfailing challenge in his polite—'They tell me I am wanted, Lady Arbuthnot?'

'Yes! to read this,' she replied, holding out the hieroglyphic.

In all her life of beauty and grace she had possibly never looked more beautiful, more graceful, and Jack Raymond realised it; realised also that, so far as that beauty, that grace were concerned, he had not forgotten—that he would never forget! And the certainty roused all his antagonism. For a moment he stood like a naughty child refusing to say its lesson; then he took the paper from her, and ran his eye down it.

'Persian,' he said. 'I had better give you the gist of it. The writer is one Khôjeeya Khânum, a pensioner. The Nawâb Jehân Aziz is her representative; he seems to have been taking toll, as they always do—it is madness paying pensions in the lump, as we do. She is starving, I suppose; they generally are! No'—a faint interest dispersed some of the contempt in his face—'it seems she wants money for a specific purpose—to buy the "essence of happiness." That word is *itr-i-khush*, isn't it, sir?'

The commissioner, thus appealed to—a man who was seldom in fault in speaking the vernaculars—frowned over the symbol.

'*Itr-i-khush*, 'm, it may be. But it doesn't matter, since it is money she wants! I've had one or two complaints about that sweep Jehân Aziz's pensioners already, Lady Arbuthnot, and we are going to inquire. So I'll put this one's name

down too, if I may. Khôjeeya Khânum—thanks. Well, good-night, Lady Arbuthnot! I've a reader with a file yards high waiting me—most important papers. Good-night, Raymond; you haven't forgotten the trick, I see. You are still as good a *moonshi* as ever, isn't he, Lady Arbuthnot?'

'Except in regard to the "Essence of Happiness,"' she replied coolly, making Jack Raymond stare at her, and Lesley once more become impatient.

'But the old woman is waiting,' she interrupted, 'she is waiting for an answer in the bird-cage; surely some one ought to go and tell her something!'

Several of the guests had taken advantage of the commissioner's departure to say their farewells also, so that those three were left in a group by themselves.

'I will go,' said Grace suddenly, 'if Mr. Raymond can spare time from his whist——'

'To find happiness,' he put in quickly, 'by all means!'

The mosaic causeway was narrow, so Lesley fell behind. The shining limb of the water-cross lay to one side of her, the edge of massed flowers to the other. The sky was deepening in its blue overhead, the creeping shadows below had gripped the lace bird-cage in the distance, making it look cold and grey. But the sun which caught the tops of the blossoming trees and made the painted kites that floated above them from the city look like jewels, seemed to linger mysteriously in the soft pink of Grace Arbuthnot's dress, the gay orange and yellow of Jack Raymond's blazer, and claim them as part of its brightness.

In the hush of evening, the insistent 'Do-you-love-too—do-you-love-too' of one small cinnamon dove hidden in a rose-bush, seemed to fill the garden. Until from beyond it came some gay voices discussing the 'Essence of Happiness' as the departing guests got into their carriages.

'Take your choice of the four W's!' said one; 'wisdom, wine, wealth, women!'

'I choose a whisky-and-soda,' retorted another. 'I give you in the rest, especially after tennis. By Jove! that was a splendid game.'

'Four W's!' put in a higher key. 'You've forgotten Worth—oh! I don't mean that worth, of course. The dress-maker man——'

'Ye don't need his art, me dear lady——'

Lesley, walking behind those two, paused suddenly; for Jack Raymond had lingered to hold back that trailing rose-shoot from *her* frills and flounces also. And the cinnamon dove, startled by the pause, fled from the rose-bush to silence and deeper shade. Its flight made her start also.

'Frightened at a dove!' said Jack Raymond in a low tone, 'and you weren't a bit frightened at the plague.'

He was smiling at her, his face all soft and kind. She had never seen it like that before. But as he stepped back to Grace Arbuthnot's side, Lesley realised that *she* had.

The certainty that these two had been lovers once came to her then, and brought a curious sense of loneliness. The certainty that, in a way, they would be lovers always, brought her a pang before which she stood aghast. For there was no mistaking it; it was unreasonable, elemental jealousy.

She felt inclined, then and there, to turn back and leave them to do their task alone. They did not want her. What was she, Lesley Drummond, doing there in that garden whose suggestiveness seemed to stifle her? Yes! to stifle her, because she could not escape from it! She, Lesley Drummond, who—— In her mind's eye she saw a vision of herself alighting from an omnibus at the corner of Bond Street on a wet day, picking her way over the greasy blister-marks of many feet on the pavement, heedless of the infinite suggestions in the shop windows, to have tea at a ladies'-club with an intimate friend, and solve the problems of life by hard and fast individualism tempered by a sloppy socialism.

Solve! As if it were possible to solve anything in those conditions. Above all, to solve the greatest problem in the world for women, as you drank your tea on a table littered with the literature of *chiffon*-culture, whose every page proclaimed that woman's aim was to remain temptress, her goal a garden such as this!

They were close to the sanctuary now. The others had entered it, and Lesley paused to look contemptuously at its filagree pretence of protection ere she, too, stooped under its low arch.

'I think you have it, haven't you, Lesley?' asked Grace Arbuthnot, as she entered to find a puzzled look on all three faces. In the old woman's it was mixed with a half-indignant apprehension.

'Have what?' she asked coldly.

'The silk cord that was round the roll; I gave it to you to hold, I think. She won't speak without it; it seems it is a bracelet—an amulet.'

'The bracelet of brotherhood without which a woman cannot speak to a strange man,' explained Jack Raymond. 'Ah! you are wearing it.'

She was. Quite idly she had fastened it by its loop and button round her wrist, in order to keep it safe. She took it off now, and handed it to him without a word. He passed it to Auntie Khôjee, whose withered face settled into self-satisfaction as she leant forward, detaining his hand till the bracelet was safely looped on his brown wrist.

Then the words came fast. Floods of them; and Jack Raymond listened patiently.

Fine though the filagree of marble was that shut them off from the garden, it interrupted the light, so that their figures showed dimly to each other. But the scent of the garden drifted in unchecked, and mixed with the faint scent of heliotrope from Grace Arbuthnot's dress. There was something breathless, disturbing to the senses, Lesley felt, in that uncomprehending effort to understand. It was a relief when silence fell suddenly, and there was a pause.

'Is that all?' whispered Grace; she was next to Jack Raymond, her dress touching him.

'I believe I ought to give her a bracelet in return,' he began. She had one of her gold bangles off in a moment, and was thrusting it into his hand—'Take that, please do—you might let me do so much, surely——'

Lesley turned and stepped outside. She felt the need of fresh air.

'There was no use my stopping,' she explained when, after an interval, the two rejoined her. 'I could not understand.'

'Not understand!' echoed Grace Arbuthnot reproachfully. 'I couldn't understand the words either. But I thought the idea perfectly charming. I wouldn't have missed the little scene for worlds. And she was so delighted with the gold bangle.'

'It is really not uncommon, Lady Arbuthnot,' protested Jack Raymond, who was beginning to feel a trifle restive again. 'And in the old days, the *râm rucki* was constantly sent by distressed——'

'I know,' interrupted Lesley captiously. 'You read of it in Meadows Taylor's books. But why did she give it to you?'

He paused; a quick annoyance showed on his face; he turned to Lady Arbuthnot vexedly.

'I must apologise,' he said; 'I never realised till this moment that she must have taken me——'

'For Sir George,' put in Grace quietly. 'Didn't you? Now I was thinking all the time how much better you played the part than he would have done. He is like Lesley. He loathes sentiment. No, Mr. Raymond, I won't take it!' she added, as he tried to unfasten the *râm rucki*. 'Give it to Sir George himself, if you like—there he is, coming to meet us. Or,' she continued, with an elusive, almost mischievous smile, as she went forward to greet her husband, leaving those two on the path together, 'give it back to Miss Drummond! She gave it you first!'

Jack Raymond looked after her quite angrily; then laughed, drew out his pocket-book and laid the *râm rucki* between the folds of some bank-notes.

'I shall end by doing my duty some day, if this goes on, Miss Drummond,' he said resignedly. 'It is really very kind of you all to take so much interest in my spiritual and bodily welfare.'

As a rule Lesley would have been ready with a sharp retort. Now she was silent. She was thinking that it was true. She had given the bracelet of brotherhood to him first. And then once more a vast impatience seized her. How unreal, how fantastic it was! How far removed from the security of the commonplace!

CHAPTER XVI

THE PRISON OF LIFE

To old Auntie Khôjee, however, the incident which Lesley had stigmatised as unreal, and fantastic, was quite natural. Her life, and the lives of thousands such as she, dreary, dull, squalid, as they seem to the eyes of Western women, are yet leavened by many wholly unpractical touches which raise them at times to pure romance. The secret worship of the Gods, the thousand and one omens to be sought, or avoided, the endless fanciful ceremonials; all these are, in their monotonous lives, witnessing to the passion for self-effacement in something beyond the woman's own individuality—in something that has to be cajoled and considered, not because it is feared, but because it is loved and must therefore be kept tied to the apron-string—which is Eve's legacy to women of all races and all creeds.

So, as the old lady limped through the bazaars, huddled up in a dirty domino, with Grace Arbuthnot's bangle clutched close to her heart, she felt no surprise at what had happened. Her only feeling was one of regret for having so long believed folk's tales of change. If she had only resorted earlier to ancient methods, little Sa'adut's life might perhaps have been spared. Though that, of course, was God's will; just as it was His will also that at the very last gasp she should have been told by a gossip that the Lord-*sahib* was coming, as the Kings came in past times to entertain their friends in the pleasure-garden.

For Khôjee was, literally, at the last gasp. Even Lateefa had not been near the courtyard for three days, though he had promised to look in every morning. In truth, this was not the kite-maker's fault, since he was, once more, kicking his heels in the lock-up. He had not anticipated this result when—on the impulse of the moment—he had slipped the

ring, instead of a morsel of brick, into one of the tiny calico bags which he had found the easiest way of attaching ballast to his kites. It had been but the work of a second to do this, and send the kite up to hover in the steady west wind —on trial—with its string attached to one of the wooden pegs driven for that purpose into the brick wall. So he had had no time for full consideration; but even had he had this, he would scarcely have imagined that Jehân would at once take the irrevocable step of calling in the aid of the police; that being a course which no wise man adopted save as a last resort, when the choice only lay between two evils.

But Jehân's rage had mastered his caution. The loss of the symbol of past power had raised such a tempest of desire for that power of personal coercion, that, seeing no other means of gaining it, he had at once given not only Lateefa, but Burkut Ali in charge for having, between them, stolen the ring. And that despite the voluntary demonstration of innocence afforded by a stripping to stark nakedness of both the accused! They must, he shrilled, have swallowed it!

Dire suggestion to an executive whose chief method of detecting crime is by personal discomfort to the fourth and fifth generation of those presumably implicated in it! Lateefa had felt his liver dissolve, had for one brief moment thought of confession; but the presence of the police, he saw, would make *that* a leaving of the frying-pan for the fire.

So he and Burkut Ali, the latter vowing vengeance calmly (and knowing he would get it too, since he had money and Jehân had none), were hauled away, not to judgment, but to that worse evil, preliminary inquiry.

Burkut, however, had found bail; and he had been back in his haunts for two days, making Jehân begin to see his mistake, while Lateefa, very sick and sorry for himself, still remained in process of observation.

But by this time his philosophy had returned, and, as he kicked his heels, he composed another mathematical verselet which should equal the values of 'I, Lateefa, laid on nothingness the burden of all things, and the burden of all things made nothingness of Lateefa!'

Of all this, however, Auntie Khôjee knew nothing as she made her way straight to the pawnbroker's where she had pledged Khâdeeja Khânum's best pink satin trousers. For

the recovery of these was the first necessity. On the morrow ceremonial visits of condolence would begin in the wide courtyard, and she dare not ask Khâdjee to receive them in her ordinary attire.

Grace Arbuthnot's bangle would, of course, redeem the trousers over and over again; but the old lady decided *this* should only be left, in exchange, for one night, as it would be easy to return the garment after the morrow's visits were over; since there would be no more need for it for at least three days. And that would set the bangle free for its legitimate purchase of the 'Essence of Happiness.'

It was growing dark as she limped along the narrow bazaar. The cavernous shops on either side were but half lit with flaring rushlights. The continuous stream of people passing one way or the other seemed inevitably to thrust her furtive swathed figure into the gutter. And so, at one shop, round which a crowd had gathered, it needed patience before a way could be edged onwards. It was a drug shop, and it seemed to be driving a roaring trade. As a couple of white-robed men elbowed past her, she heard one say, with a sinister satisfaction—

'And our *Somâj* dispensary hath trebled its attendance these last days. The people know their friends, know themselves safe! Not that the tales of poison at the hospitals are true; but what will you? These poor folks are ignorant, and we have promised——'

What the promise was, Khôjee did not catch; nor did she care to know. All her thoughts were with Khâdjee's pink satin trousers. Therefore she felt as if the whole round world had slipped from under her feet when Mittun, the pawnbroker, from the midst of the miscellaneous collection of rubbish in which he sat like a tame magpie possessed by the nest-building instinct, told her calmly that he had just sold them! Sold them at an incredibly high price to a lady of the bazaar who was in a hurry for something smart in which to appear at an assignation that evening. And then, with infinite self-complacency, he drew out from a bag two rupees and some pice.

'See this, mother!' he said, handing her the money. ''Tis a chance such as comes but once in a *kobari*'s life, who must needs fill his belly a many times with other folk's leavings ere he find a grain of corn to stay his own hunger

withal.' Here he looked round distastefully at the old lamps, keys, pickle-bottles, rags, books—Heaven knows what—that made up his stock-in-trade, and which, in truth, looked but indigestible fare. 'Yet I am honest,' he went on; 'this much I made, over and above what I loaned thee on them. So there 'tis, with but the due interest held back. Let none say Mittun, *kobari*, is no honest man, who cares not for his customers——'

'Nay! *meean-jee*,' fluttered Khôjee, helpless. 'None said that of thee. Yet would I rather the trousers, and I could have given thee gold.'

Mittun eyed the bangle covetously. 'Give it me now, mother. I could loan thee ten rupees on that to buy new trousering.'

Khôjee shook her head timidly; for even the pawnbroker, being a man, had authority.

''Tis for to-morrow, brother; there is not time——'

'Thou couldst buy second-hand,' he persisted; 'there be many in the bazaar, though I have them not. In truth, *Mussumat* Khôjee, I would have sold thine for less than I got, seeing that old clothes are no safe purchase nowadays, what with police inspection, and no rags here, no rags there! As if the plague came in aught but God's will!'

Khôjee, fearful of persuasion, assented hastily to the pawnbroker's piety. Everything was God's will; even her failure to redeem the pink satin trousers!

'I will give thee fifteen for the bangle,' called Mittun after her, and she quickened her limp from the temptation. The bangle was for another purpose. Still fifteen rupees would purchase the 'Essence of Happiness' and leave a margin for *sagou dana* (sago) and *salep misri*. Also for real cardamoms. Yes! surely with fifteen rupees in prospect she might afford herself some real cardamoms for to-morrow's assemblage, instead of the cheaper kind she had laid in. It would give style to the occasion, even if the pink satin trousers were unattainable.

Another crowd, before a shop, delayed her as she limped along in the gutter. There was a policeman in it this time, and a voice protesting that it was tyranny. What had the police to do with the selling of a quilt—a quilt that was no longer wanted, seeing that the grandfather had found freedom?

'*Ari*, idiot!' said the policeman, 'have a care I do not burn it.'

'Give him his percentage, brother!' advised Govind the editor, who, as usual, was hunting the bazaars for news. 'That is what he wants. That is the trick. Yea! I know. Give it him, or he will claim the whole in the name of the plague. That is what the *Sirkar* does in Bombay. It claims all—money, jewels, clothes. And it will do the same here. This is but the beginning.'

''Twill be the end for thee and thy paper, editor-*jee*, if thou tellest more lies,' retorted the constable in righteous indignation. 'It is orders, I tell thee! There is suspicion that some one——'

Govind, who, as usual, also had been at the *bhang* shop, gave a jeering laugh. '*Bapree bap!* some one! 'Tis always *some one* or *some thing*; but we of Nushapore, my masters, will show them we are not as those of Bombay. We can fight for our own.'

There was a surge of assent in the crowd, as if it sought to begin at once, and Khôjee, clutching her gold bangle tighter, fled incontinently down a by-street. So little might turn her limp into a fall, and then that fifteen-rupees'-worth might roll into the gutter and be snatched up by any one. Here, in the tortuous alleys, it was at least quiet, though it was dark. She slithered in the welter of the day's rubbish flung from the high houses on either side, and a scamper of pattering feet told her she had disturbed some rats battening on a bit of choice garbage.

'*Allah hamid!*' she muttered piously, and went on. The sound of wailing from one of the scarce-seen houses she was passing reminded her regretfully of the cardamoms; for she had left shops behind her. Then she remembered one, not far from the gate of the city, which she must pass; one of those miscellaneous shops which are always to be found near city gates, where travellers can buy most things—flour and vegetables, red peppers, pipe bowls, tobacco. Ay, and opium perhaps; but on the sly, since there was no licence over the door. It was not the sort of shop that such as Khôjeeya Khânum patronised as a rule; still it might have cardamoms.

The low-caste *buniya*, with a wrinkled monkey face and long iron-grey hair, who crouched behind dingy platters and

dusty bags, looked ghoulish by the one flickering light set in the solitary cavern of a shop; for on either side of it was blank wall, trending away to narrow alleys.

Khôjee hesitated. Such men drove many nefarious trades. Still this one might have cardamoms!

'Cardamoms!' he echoed with a leer. 'Yea, yea, princess! True cardamoms to satisfy the best of royal blood—he! he!' Those tall houses round his shop held many such as she, and he had recognised the accent.

Khôjee scarce knew whether to be flustered or flattered beneath her domino.

'And be speedy,' she said haughtily. 'I have no time to spare thee.'

'Lo! *Nawâbin*,' he jeered, 'I have them; such cardamoms as——' He was rummaging in the heterogeneous mass piled up against the back wall of his shop. 'Wait but a moment. I have them—I have them. But two days ago, my princess, I had them.'

Here, by chance, an unwary pull sent a pile of parcels and bundles in confusion round him, and one rolled nigh to Aunt Khôjee, who—careful ever—laid a hold of it to save a possible fall into the gutter. The light fell on something green and sheeny, her fingers recognised the feel of satin, and, the bundle having unrolled itself somewhat, she caught sight of the unmistakable cut of a trouser leg! She opened it out a little curiously.

'Canst not leave things alone?' snapped the shopkeeper angrily. 'Those be not cardamoms.'

'They be something I may need for all that,' retorted Khôjee with spirit—the spirit which never fails a woman in the struggle for *chiffons*. So there she was, testing the satin with her finger, appraising the make. If they had only been pink!—though that was but a detail, since they were beyond her purse; the satin better by far than the much-to-be-regretted pink—the whole newer—

She wrinkled them aside with a sigh. 'Give me the cardamoms, brother. I have not the money for these.' The man looked at her cunningly.

'If the Daughter of Kings needs trousers, she will find none cheaper.'

'They would yet be too dear for me, brother,' she answered mildly; 'the cardamoms will do.'—

He edged nearer, his evil face growing confidential. 'Lo! Bhagsu never drives a hard bargain with the noble,' he cringed. 'It might be that the virtuous lady's money would purchase these, and save them from the badness of bazaars; since they come from virtue and should go to virtue. How much hath the princess to offer?'

Khôjee gave a half-embarrassed laugh. It was impossible, of course, and yet——

'*That* is as may be,' she replied; 'what she *will offer*, is this——' With a flutter of shame and hope she put down the two rupees and the handful of pice. Then she remembered the cardamoms! 'That,' she continued, telling herself she might as well be bold to the bitter end, 'for the trousers *and* the cardamoms.' It was a diplomatic stroke, if an unconscious one, for Bhagsu instantly recognised that she had, indeed, ventured her all; that the chance was his to take or leave.

He gave a melancholy groan, then began to roll up the green satin, and tie it round with some of the triple-coloured cotton hanking used at weddings, which, for some occult reason, is always sold at these wayside shops. 'Shiv-*jee* be my witness,' he whimpered, 'I give them for naught. But what then? Virtue goes out to virtue, and those who live amongst the noble must be noble!'

Khôjee could hardly believe her ears.

Half an hour afterwards she could hardly believe her eyes, as—Khâdjee having retired safely to sleep with a sausage-roll pillow and a quilt—she sate in the courtyard gloating over her wonderful purchase.

It was simply astounding. Even Khâdjee must forgive her duplicity in regard to that secret pawning of pink trousers, with such green ones as these for reparation! all piped, and edged, and faced, with quite a new braiding of gold thread down the front seam, and a new scent to them also; the wearer must have been in strange parts, though the cut was of the North.

She folded the precious garments with loving little pats, brought out the remaining portions of the state toilet from the almost empty store, saw that Noormahal's muslin was as pure and white and smooth as her old hands could make it, arranged the cardamoms in little saucers, and so, when the city had long since become silent, curled her tired old limbs

on a string bed set across the doorway of the inner court —where the servant should have slept, had there been one—and slept fitfully.

For she had to be up at dawn, so that everything should be ready for the visitings, and yet leave her time to get round to the goldsmith's, sell the bangle by weight, and purchase some 'Essence of Happiness'—which was, alas! worth its weight in gold.

Yet when it came it had not much effect, greatly to poor Khôjee's disappointment. Even the quivering, sobbing keene of her neighbours and relations did not rouse Noormahal to any proper display of grief, and—as the groups whispered—how could you expect to lose tears unless you shed them? Was it not a distinct defiance of Providence to deal, even with sorrow, as if it were your own absolutely? Finally, was not *khushki* (dryness) one of the fundamental faults in things created?—the other being *gurm-ai* (heat).

Khâdeeja Khânum, however, was quite sufficiently *tur* and *tunda* (damp and cool) to satisfy the most rigid standard of etiquette; and what with the real cardamoms, the new trousers, a pennyworth of orange-blossom oil which Khôjee had brought with the 'Essence of Happiness,' and a most encouraging report of prevailing sickness and death amongst mutual acquaintances brought by the visitors, the old lady had quite a flush on her withered cheeks by evening, and admitted to her sister, when the latter helped her to undress, that the whole thing had really gone off very well.

Nevertheless she was rather fatigued on the next day. The day after that, Khôjee, returning from the purchasing of some lemon-grass oil, wherewith to wile away the aching in the back, caused, no doubt, by the muscular effort of a continual whimper, found her seated on the string bed in the centre of the lonely courtyard, attired in the green satin trousers and concomitants, waiting, so she said, for the bridal party to arrive.

How stupid Khôjee was! Of course, having regard to her deformity, it was only natural she should take little heed of such things. But all were not made that way, and it was high time the bridal party *did* come. It seemed, indeed, as if an undue interval had elapsed since the betrothal day, when—if Khôjee would remember—she wore pink, not green. Anyhow she, *Shâhzâdi* Khâdeeja Khânum, was not one to

stand any slackness in a bridegroom's ardour, and if he did not appear that day, she would choose another.

She did. Death claimed her as his before twelve hours were over; almost before poor Noormahal, roused at last from her absorption in grief, had realised she was ill. It seemed incredible! The Nawâbin's big eyes, larger, darker than ever—encircled as they were by great shadows which seemed to have crept down the oval of her face, making it pointed, pinched—turned to Aunt Khôjee, even at the moment of death, in bewildered reproach and regret.

'And thou hast called none in to send her soul forth with prayers? Oh, Khôjee! that was ill done. Nay! I mean no blame for thee alone, kind one, but for us both—yet we did not know—we did not dream—did we?'

Khôjee stood for a second, speechless, rigid, her eyes staring, yearning towards the familiar face over which the awful unfamiliar look was creeping; then, with a wild cry, she threw up her arms and grovelled at Noormahal's feet.

'Nay! I knew—I knew from the first. Oh, child! I have killed her—I, Khôjee—hush! wail not! None must know. And touch her not, Noormahal; that is for me—for her sister who killed her. Lo! child, sole hope of the house! stand further—I can do all—I will do all.—O Khâdjee! Khâdjee! canst thou forgive? And I knew—I knew in my heart all was not right. I knew none would rightly sell such green satin trousers'—here she broke into sobbing laughter—'yet wert thou happy, sister, and I took the blame of theft, if it was theft—and it was—theft of thy life—O Khâdjee! Khâdjee!'

Noormahal, pressed back by frantic clinging arms into a corner of the dark room—for Khôjee, declaring the illness to be a chill, had insisted on keeping the patient inside—caught in her breath fearfully. 'Peace, Khôjee! let me go, auntie!—Lo! thou art not well thyself—the fever hath thee—thou art distraught with grief, as I was. Come, let us go into the light, and I myself will call——'

Khôjee rose to her feet, and laid a quick hand on Noormahal's mouth. 'Nay! none must call,' she said sternly, her self-control brought back by dread. 'Yea! come into the light, and leave her. Come, and I will tell thee there--in the light.'

'How dost thou know?' asked Noormahal, gone grey to

her very lips. 'It is not that—lo! folk die of other things. I have seen them. Remember our cousin—it was just so——'

Khôjee's mask of despair showed no wavering. 'Nay, it is the plague. They talked of it at the wailing. It hath been here and there in the city this week past. Mittun held it blasphemy that it should be aught but God's will, and I cried yea! to him; but cannot God send it in the clothes?' Her face, drawn, haggard, almost awful in its questioning, settled after a second into decision. 'Yea! it is the plague—the swellings they speak of are there. It was the trousers. I killed her. And none must know, or they will come and poison thee in hospital, lest it spread. That is why I called no one. The courtyard is wide. I can dig a grave——' Noormahal gave a sharp cry of horrified dissent. 'Yea! I can—my hands are not as thine, sweetheart, soft and fine. Old Khôjee's ugliness can do more than thy beauty—the beauty of King's Daughters which none may see! Remember that, child, remember that'—her voice rang clear of sobs for those words; she rose from where she had crouched to tell her tale, and looked round her with dull, yet steady, eyes. 'There is no hurry. If folk come, none need know she is dead. I will say she sleeps. And at night I can dig. Yea! I knew it from the first. But there is no fear, heart's darling! Thou hast scarce been nigh her. That is why I kept her close. And to-night I will carry her to the outer courtyard—there is a padlock to the *nanbut khana* stairs, and room for—room for *her* beside them. I have thought—yea! thought while I watched. There is no fear, Noormahal! All will go well. Thou wilt have patience, as wives should, and Jehân will return to thee, and little Sa'adut from his paradise will smile on brothers—ay! and sisters too—sisters whom thou wilt spare to old Aunt Khôjee's arms. God knows it shall be so. Deny it not, girl—dare not to deny it! He only knows!'

Her face through its tears was alight with faith and hope and charity, and Noormahal's, as she looked, lost its hardness; a dreaminess that was almost tender came to the dry, bright eyes.

'Yea! He knows.'

That night, after the peacocks with their broken plaster tails ceased to show against the growing dusk, there were

faint cautious sounds below them, where the two women dug at a grave. For in this, at least, Noormahal had said she could help. It was not finished by dawn; and after that Khôjee worked alone and only by snatches, while Noormahal watched from the door of the inner courtyard, ready to give the alarm should any visitor come—ready also to entertain them.

And the next night Khôjee would have no help at all. How she managed was a marvel, but she did manage. Even Khâdeeja Khânum herself, had she been able to make comments, could scarcely have found fault with any lack of ceremony. And she would certainly have been gratified by her dead-clothes; for Khôjee, with that terrible remorse at her heart, spared nothing from the costume of ceremony. The green satin trousers should deal no more death. And even the silver earrings, the few trumpery silver bracelets, parting from which would have been worse than death to the dead woman, she replaced with facsimiles in 'German.' For silver could be purified by fire, and the living had need of it; while who knew whether the corpse could tell the difference? Not likely, since God was good, and therefore there was no need to be on one's guard against cheating in His Paradise! So, in a way, 'German' was as good as silver there! For poor Khôjee's white soul arrived at right conclusions by curious methods; she worked by them also, and, when that second dawn came, it was a very tired old woman who crept to the string bed set against the door.

But she rose again early, and telling Noormahal that, since there was now no one in the house but herself while marketings were going on, she had better keep the inner door closed, went off to the bazaar. She limped more than ever because of her tiredness, yet she sped through the streets quicker than usual, since, for the first time in her life, she went with her face uncovered. There was a breathlessness in that old face, and the old hands that held the knotted corner of her veil, wherein she had tied every available morsel of silver, every scrap of gold lace or ornament for which even a farthing could be got, were clasped on each other with almost painful tension.

'Lo, brother!' she said mildly to the goldsmith, 'what matters a *ruthi* or two. Weigh it quick, and give what is just. What is just! that is all I ask.'

It was not much, that bare justice, but it was something; and there was still a rupee or two over from the 'Essence of Happiness,' from the unavoidable expenses of that secret burial. So she passed hurriedly to a grain-merchant's shop.

Here she felt lost for a moment, lost, in the magnitude of what she needed to one whose purchases for many years had been a bare day's supply.

'It is for a wedding, likely?' asked the grain-dealer curiously.

'Likely,' she echoed softly. Her very brain felt tired, and it seemed to her confusedly as if, after all, it might be a wedding. The Lord-*sahib* might send help, Noormahal might be saved, Jehân might come back to her. All things were possible to patience; and she, Khôjee, was patient enough, surely?

'Thou must send it in an hour's time,' she said to the corn-dealer, her head being still clear enough for that one single purpose of hers, 'then I shall be back. And, look you! I have paid coolie hire. There must be no asking for more.'

That was a necessary warning, since, when she reached home, every farthing would have been spent.

All but one was spent, when she paused beside the public scribe who had set up his desk at a corner where two bazaars met.

'Is it a letter, mother?' he asked of the old woman who put out a hand against the wooden pillar of the neighbouring shop as if for support. 'To the house-master, likely.'

She shook her head this time. 'Nay, *meean*! There is no house-master,' she said softly, as before, 'and it is not even a letter. But a *pice*-worth of words on a scrap of paper. Listen! "*There is food enough. Tarry the Lord's coming without fear or noise. I have locked the door.*" Canst do that for a pice, *meean*? And write clear, 'tis for a woman's eyes.' As she repeated the message, swaying to and fro as if she were reciting the Koran, the scribe smiled at a bystander and touched his forehead significantly.

'If beauty lie behind the door, the locking of it is a *pice*-worth in itself,' he said with a grin, 'and I give the rest!'

'*If beauty lay behind it!*' she thought as she went on, with the paper folded in her hands. Yes! it was beauty, for the safety of which her ugliness was responsible. Had she

done all? Had she forgotten nothing? Nothing that would ensure Noormahal from intrusion until she, Khôjee the plague-stricken, had died in the streets. For that was her plan. When death came close, as it surely must come soon, as it had done to Khâdjee, she would unbolt the doors and wander away—like a tailor-bird luring a snake from its nest—into the outskirts of the city, right away from the old house. And then what stranger was to know that Khâdjee had died of plague, and was buried by the *naubut khana* stairs?

When death came close! but not till then. Surely there was no need till then to face the world—surely she might claim that much!

And when she was dead no one would know the lame old woman was Khôjeeya Khânum, Daughter of Kings. Not even Lateefa.

The thought of him brought her a sudden fear. He was the only one who, having the right to claim it, might, by chance, seek entrance to the courtyard in the next day or two. She might on her way home see him, or leave a message to reassure him, at the house next Dilarâm's, whither she had fled with the news of Sobrai's escape.

There was no one in the house, no one in the little yard behind it; but Lateefa had been there not long ago, for the clippings of his trade littered one corner, and two draggled kites, their strings still fastened to wooden pegs in the wall, lay huddled in another.

Dilarâm might know; a message might be left with her.

As Khôjee stumbled up the dark stairs to a balcony for the first time in her life, she tried to straighten her veil, but her hands trembled; it would not fold decorously.

There were three or four drowsy women lounging in the room at the door of which she stood, beset by a sudden shyness, and three of them tittered at the unusual sight; but the fourth said severely—

'What dost here, sister? This is no place for thy sort.'

'I—I seek Lateefa,' she faltered, and the others tittered louder.

'Peace, fools!' said Dilarâm angrily. 'Dost mean Lateefa the kitemaker?'

But Khôjee had found her dignity. 'Yea! Lateef of the House of the Nawâb Jehân Aziz, on whom be peace. Tell him, courtesan, that Khôjeeya Khânum——' She paused,

doubtful of her message, and, in the pause, the jingles on Dilarâm's feet clashed once more as she rose to do honour to a different life.

'Let the *Bibi sahiba* speak,' she said in her most mellifluous tones. 'We in the freedom of vice are slaves to the prisoners of virtue.'

'Tell him,' said Khôjeeya Khânum, 'that it is well with the prison and the prisoners. That they need no service.'

As she stumbled down the stairs again there was no sound of tittering.

It was nearly an hour after this, and the noonday sun was flooding the courtyards, when Khôjee, having completed her preparations, closed the door between them softly, so as not to disturb Noormahal—who had already retired for the usual midday sleep—and slipped a paper through the chink of the lintel ere drawing it close and padlocking the hasp.

Noormahal could not fail to see the reassuring message there when she woke, and began to wonder where Auntie Khôjee had gone.

As she straightened herself from stooping to the padlock, she felt, giddily, that she had locked herself out of life. She had but a few hours left of seclusion, and then—the streets.

But those few hours she might surely claim. So she closed and barred the wicket in the outer door, and dragging a string bed into the scant shade cast by the *naubut khana*, found rest for her aching limbs. And there she lay silent, taking no heed of Noormahal's knockings and appeals which, after a time, rose cautiously. When they ceased the old woman gave a sigh of relief.

Thus far all had gone well. Now she had only to wait till she felt she dare wait no more.

So she lay, watching the shadows of the broken-tailed plaster peacocks of royalty above the gateway creep over the courtyard, up the walls, and disappear into thin air.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PEN AND THE SWORD

JEHÂN AZIZ was meanwhile repenting at leisure in Oriental fashion. That is, he had succumbed to the perpetual temptation of a string bed set either in shade or sunshine, to which it is always possible to retire without, as it were, quite throwing up the sponge. An Englishman who seeks his bed and turns his face to the wall gives himself away; the native who does the same thing is not even committed to discouragement. And Jehân, though he had a racking headache from an attempt to drown care in a debauch, was not exactly discouraged. His anger, though impotent, was too strong for that. Indeed, his whole force of character lay in his fierce arrogance; for he was neither clever nor cunning, like Burkut Ali. And so when, the day after the disappearance of the ring, the latter walked coolly in as if nothing had happened, and sat down on the end of the string bed, Jehân only sat up at the other end and glowered at the man, without whom he knew himself to be lost.

'Thou hadst best tell the truth, Lord of the Universe,' said Burkut, with a fine sarcasm, 'for I have heard many lies from the police. My head whirls with women, and pearls, and God knows what! Is there so much as foothold anywhere, whence we may deal a blow?'

Jehân felt comforted by that plural, though it roused curiosity to know what Burkut would be at. In truth, the latter's first desire for vengeance on Jehân only, had shifted as he had listened to the tales he bribed the police to tell. Here, it had seemed to him, was the possibility of greater mischief; mischief which, it was true, could have no immediate or definite object, but which would add something fresh to that rock of offence, that stumbling-block in the way of the alien master, on which it was the duty of the disloyal to cast every stone they could.

It took five cigarettes, and two whisky-pegs sent for from the liquor-shop next door, ere Jehân—in the absolute undress which seems to afford comfort to all Indians in time of trouble—had finished his tale.

'There is much in it,' remarked Burkut slowly. 'As for the ring, Lateef hath it. There is none else. And he is a friend of thy house. He worked there; is it not so? Bethink thee, is there no woman in it who hath a hold on him?'

Jehân frowned horribly at the indecent suggestion; but even this insult, he felt, had to be faced. 'None,' he said shortly, 'unless the jade who escaped.'

Burkut grinned cunningly and shook his head. 'My lord doth not understand women. Lateef hath kept the ring for the honour, not the dishonour, of the house. It will go back, if it hath not already gone, to the safe keeping which hath secured it all these years.'

Jehân winced again under the innuendo. 'Think you it is there already?'

'It will be, if we give him time,' replied Burkut; 'and all the more surely, if we say it is there already. That is simple, since Nushapore knows that the guardianship of the signet was not with my lord always. It is but to withdraw the charge of theft, saying that we have found the ring returned to its rightful owner, the Nawâbin.'

This time Jehân ground his teeth; he felt his impotence, even against this man, horribly. 'And then?' he asked sullenly.

'And then we shall be free to watch Lateefa. We can give him time to go to his hiding-place. And then we can search him—and thy house. But without the police! We must have no more of *their* methods. It hath cost me somewhat to get beyond them now, which sum shall be as a debt between thee and me—but there must be no more of it!'

'But the pearls?' replied Jehân uneasily; 'the pearls and that jade Sobrai, whom God curse.'

Burkut gave a sudden blink of his long eyes. 'Say rather, may God curse those who led virtue astray! 'Tis a tale, my lord, to dissolve heart and liver! Kidnapped by order, almost by force. Bribed to a *sahib's* pleasure by pearls. By four pearls taken—oh! most horrible!—from a string which the head of her house had, with tears, sold to that same

sahib! Sold in his honourable indigence, which had not hesitated to wrench the last ornament from the necks of virtuous women in order to keep them virtuous——' He paused in his periods for breath.

'*Wâh!*' said Jehân stupidly—his jaw had almost fallen in sheer surprise—'that runs well. But the proof?'

Burkut smiled a superior smile. 'Thy reluctance to allow publicity. Thy instant assertion that the pearls were thine. Lo! is not the whole true, save that Lucanaster *sahib* gave the pearls to Sobrai? And that is for him to prove. "*Tis a lie to a truth and the two will sink or swim together*" is good wisdom!'

'But they must see the pearls—they said so but yesterday. The magistrate *sahib*——'

'Go to him, and make thy confession. Say that there was but this untruth. The pearls were not, they *had* been thine. Say that, even now, if thou canst but get the girl back in secret——'

'In secret,' echoed Jehân fiercely, 'when already the police——'

Burkut lost patience then. 'Fool! canst not thou see that in that lies the gain? *Thou* canst stand aloof, but the hell-doomed must answer! And not the one; but all. Lo! it is a tale for the bazaars! for the newspapers! And 'tis not as if thou couldst keep it secret longer. Thou canst not. Therefore use it against those whose fault it is that thou canst not.' He paused, suddenly folded his hands in the attitude of service, and said reverently: 'What orders hath the Pillar of Justice, the Mighty in Power, the Disposer of Slaves, regarding a necklace of pearls, and one Sobrai Begum, a woman of his household?'

The sarcasm bit deep, and Jehân Aziz, the Rightful Heir to such power, swore, this time, horribly, feeling as Burkut intended, that revenge was better than nothing.

'And I will bring trouble to Miss Leezie also,' he began viciously, when Burkut cut him short.

'That were unwise. She stands too close to authority. Say it was Dilarâm——'

'Dilarâm! wherefore?' put in Jehân stupidly.

Burkut's laugh was evil beyond words. 'Because they who touch her and hers, rouse what they cannot still. Thou needst not say it for certain. That is the best of lies—there

is freedom for the tongue in them. Say it seems so. And hearken——! Govind the editor will pay for this news. If thou canst get word, by means of this money, to Sobrai herself, it would be well. She knows her fate if she comes back to thy house. Promise her escape if she will say it was Lucanaster.'

Jehân's pious wishes for the immediate destruction of all the unfaithful came almost cheerfully. He felt infinitely relieved all round. So far as the ring went, he was inclined to believe that Burkut was right. It might even now be back in Noormahal's keeping; but, before making sure of that, it would be as well to see what Lateefa would do. Then as for the pearls, he at least got some revenge. And the beauty of it was that a solid substratum of truth, sufficient to save him from trouble, underlay all the lies. The pearls *were* his; he *had* sold them to Lucanaster *sahib*; Sobrai's four *did* belong to that string; she *had* been beguiled into the cantonments.

It was only that a different complexion had been put upon the facts; a complexion which might, almost, be the right one, since who was to know why Sobrai—— —— ——

Once more the irrational, uncontrollable animal jealousy of the thought seized on him, and he felt a fierce joy in knowing that the story was one to rouse a similar feeling in many minds. And wherefore not? Were not similar stories true? Were they not to be heard every day? Were not tales of the libertinism, tyranny, and corruption of the *sahibs* to be read in every line of the newspapers? And none contradicted them; therefore they could not be contradicted. So if *this* tale were not all true (a faint scruple, that was as much an inheritance as Jehân's passion for power, lingered in spite of his desire for revenge), there were plenty of others far worse that could be proved up to the hilt.

Thus, once more, that commonest of all Indian conjuring tricks, the making of one lie out of two or more truths, started on its evil errand.

Yet not a mile away from its starting-place rose the Government College, the Courts of Justice, the Secretariat, the Revenue Offices; all the plant, the stock, and lock, and block, of an administration which, take it as you will, is the only one India has ever had, which has allowed even a whisper to be raised against it without condign punishment.

At that very moment Sir George Arbuthnot, in his private

office, was reading an article from the day's issue of the *Voice of India*, that had been brought over amongst the usual selections from the native newspapers which are submitted by the Press censor.

'*Is it too late,*' he read, '*ere the great crisis comes upon us which may mean so much to the poorest of the poor, the richest of the rich, to implore the Government to think, ere it inflicts on the helpless, the horrible and needless tortures which, there is too much reason to fear, have been inflicted on our fellow-countrymen in other parts of unhappy India? May we not once more venture to plead with the authorities for our poor townsfolk, and point out to them that these weaker brethren have beliefs which they would rather die than deny? The sacredness of the cow, for instance, must, and does seem silly, foolish, to those who eat beef every day, but to our people it is a dogma. To yield one tittle of it is eternal damnation. So with the sacredness of their women. This thesis may not be held by our rulers. We know that it is not. Those of us who have seen London do not need to be told this, and even a visit to cantonments shows us a different standard. Tales that are harrowing to the fathers and husbands of India may be food for laughter elsewhere. Therefore is it that at this crisis we venture to implore the great English Government to remember that to us such things are all important. That we cannot, we dare not away with them.*

'*The late generous announcement of Sir George Arbuthnot, our popular Lieutenant-Governor, to the effect that no coercion will be used, at the outset, has greatly soothed the natural alarm of all, raised by general and credible belief in a plan of campaign similar to those approved by authorities in all other parts of India. For which diplomatic utterance we poor folk are grateful, and which emboldens us to ask the following pertinent questions:—*

'1. *Would it not be possible, by treating ignorant poor folk with kindness and consideration, to allay their natural fears?*

'2. *Would it not be well to issue stringent rules that no woman shall be examined for plague even by British soldiers, and that Brahmins, cows, and family idols be not wilfully ill-treated?*

'3. *Though it is to be feared, alas, that jack-in-offices must perforce exhibit greed and covetousness, should not some supervision be exercised to prevent unnecessary removal of valuables, 'et hoc genus omne,' from plague-stricken houses?*

'4. *Finally, is it not possible, even at this late hour, when Plague overshadows us with horrible mantles of dread (there are persistent rumours of three cases in Muhalla Kuzai), that the co-operation and*

advice of educated natives be invited as to means of avoiding friction. Comparisons are invidious, but it is not too much to say that Messrs. Bhola-nâth——'

'You can leave off there, sir,' said the assistant-secretary. 'It is up one side of Shark Lane and down the other.'

Sir George turned over the slip to the next with elaborate patience. 'It is ingeniously suggestive,' he remarked. 'By the way, have we succeeded in getting any more volunteers for search parties?'

'Two, sir; but they are both retired native officers, and as that would make all but five, military, the commissioner thought——'

'Then we want twenty more Send a reminder to Shark Lane. And about the destruction of infected clothes?'

'There is only one thing for it, sir, as we agreed before,' replied the chief of the police. 'We must have an Englishman with each search party. It's absurd to expect constables on five rupees a month to keep their hands from picking and stealing. That fact must be faced. We do our best; but our department, which is the most difficult to deal with, is the worst paid.'

'That's a nasty story,' said Sir George suddenly. He had been glancing through another excerpt. 'Hm, the *Ear of the Wise*, editor Govinda Râm.'

'He has the best nose, anyhow, for unmitigated filth in India,' remarked the assistant-secretary; 'but of course one can't notice that sort of thing.' Here he shrugged his shoulders.

The chief of the police, who was an old military man, squared his. 'There I totally disagree, as his Honour knows. That paper has a greater effect in Nushapore than all those high-falutin' prints put together; and that's all my business. I'd have him up, on every slander, in the criminal courts. You wouldn't allow that sort of thing about the masters to be circulated in a school? And the more we remember that our position in India is virtually that of a schoolmaster, or, if you like it better, trustee to a minority, the better it will be for that minority.'

'Bravo, Grey!' said Sir George, with a smile. 'You stick to your colours. And a good many of us agree; only the people at home won't have it. They can't grasp the situation; they would as soon believe it to be a grave political danger if the little street boys hung garlands round Guy

Fawkes instead of burning him! Now, about the plague itself. Is it on us, doctor?'

'Yes, sir,' replied a small man who had just been shown in. 'We have just inspected all the native charitable dispensaries. They have no proper records, of course, and they deny increased attendance. But they are almost out of drugs. Then there are three undoubted cases in the butchers' quarter. But the fishiest part of the city is all about the Garden Gate. Those tall old houses—there has been a lot of deaths.'

'Poor, high-class Mohammedans,' remarked the assistant-secretary significantly. 'Rather bad luck.'

Sir George rose and put away his papers. 'Then we had better start. I think everything is settled. The great point is to keep—to keep normal as long as possible.'

As he quitted the room the men left in it looked at each other.

'Right so far; but after——' said one.

'Telegraph home for orders; what else can you do nowadays?'

'Do! I'd show them, if I had a free hand. I'd settle this lot.' The chief of the police slapped his confidential file viciously as he pocketed it. 'I'd limit their circulation by a little wholesome bloodletting.'

'Not worth it! They're like the fifty thousand Irish patriots.'

'What patriots?' asked the chief snappishly. He hailed from across St. George's Channel himself, and was a trifle touchy on the point of his countrymen's disloyalty.

'The fifty thousand Irish patriots whom the orator said were armed to the teeth ready to strike a blow for liberty. "Thin why the devil don't they strike it?" asked one of the audience. "Bedad! the polis' won't let them."'

'Hm! the "polis" wouldn't, if I'd my way,' muttered the old soldier.

Sir George, meanwhile, had gone straight to his wife's sitting-room; for he was already due at his daily reception of native visitors, and he had something he wished to tell her.

Scrupulously particular as he was about the absolutely English ordering of his home-life, there was something fantastic—even to him—to-day in the sight of Grace in a

low rocking-chair, reading Hans Andersen to Jerry, in a room as dainty and sweet with English flowers as any in an English country-house. What possible right had this to be here, cheek by jowl with the city! And between them nothing but Shark Lane!

'Well! George?' she asked almost nervously, for, despite the days that had passed, her fear lest that unlucky letter should turn up to give the lie to her husband's protestations on the part of the Government, lingered with her.

'Only those two ladies, my dear,' he answered with a certain meritorious air to which he had a perfect right; for he was almost worked off his legs, and might very excusably have forgotten all about poor Khôjee's appeal. 'Dawkins inquired. They belong to Jehân Aziz's pensioners. But there is a discrepancy. He says they are young and flighty girls, so he is obliged to keep them tight——'

'My dear George! she was as old as old——'

'She need not have been one of the real petitioners, my dear. In fact, seeing that they are strictly secluded, I doubt if she could be. It is quite easy to personate, when no one has any means of knowing——'

'And quite easy to say people are young and flighty, when they are not, *if they can't be seen.* How are we to find out?'

Sir George looked thoughtful. 'I'm afraid we must take the Nawâb's word. Or, with his approval, we might appoint——'

'Some one who would agree with him,' interrupted Grace impatiently. 'I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll go myself. His house is somewhere by the Garden Gate, isn't it? Surely, George, there can be no objection to that,' she added, noting his look.

He paused a moment; then said gravely: 'Only one; and that is, that we must have as little communication with the city as possible for some time to come, Grace. Yes,' he continued, as she looked at him startled. 'It is on us; but there is no need, of course, to worry for the next few days at any rate.'

She rose and stood looking out of the window thoughtfully. 'You never can tell,' she said. 'Father used always to say so to his young officers: "Remember that in India you cannot tell what the next day may bring forth."'

'Used he to say that to Mr. Raymond?'

If a bombshell had fallen between those two it could scarcely have startled them both more.

'George!' exclaimed Lady Arbuthnot reproachfully.

'I beg your pardon, my dear,' he said, going up to her with the quaintest look of elated affection, as if he were rather proud of himself; 'I don't know why the deuce I said that—except that—well! that the best of us can't quite forget—I don't believe you do—we are all a bit fundamental. However, what I mean is that times have changed since your father's day.'

'And yet you say every one is fundamental,' she interrupted in a voice that held both tears and laughter, tenderness and a faint resentment. 'And that is so true—we go back and back.'

'Then I shall go back too,' he replied cheerfully. 'Only I must give the New Diplomacy a chance. Besides'—here an obstinate look crept over his face—'as a matter of fact I have to obey orders like every one else, and my orders are clear; thanks—I don't mean it nastily—to you and your father. In fact I'm very much obliged to you. It relieves me of a lot of responsibility. All the same, I can assure that there is not the very faintest chance of difficulty for the next week at any rate. There cannot be—for the simple reason that we are not going to offend any one's prejudices. For instance, no search for plague patients will be made for the present except by special request of the natives themselves. So I really cannot see——'

'Is it likely we could?' asked Grace quickly, 'when we cannot see if a woman is young or old?—when we have to trust interested people for information? George! I often wonder you men have the courage to rule India, when you know nothing of its women, except that there has been one at the bottom of every trouble you have ever had.'

Sir George smiled indulgently. 'Well, my dear, I hope they will keep their fingers out of this pie.'

It was rather a vain hope, considering that at that very moment Govind Râm's fingers were all black with lithographic ink, and that the first edition of his broadsheet was being hawked through the bazaars. There was quite a crowd round Dilarâm's balcony where, in full dress, she sat, defiant yet sullen; now refusing to say a word, now letting herself loose in shrill abuse with disconcerting candour. She

find recruits for such as Miss Leezie? Not she! Though, had she chosen, she might—— here had followed tales half-true, half-false, that were listened to, not with eagerness or anger, but with the calm assent which is so much more dangerous, since it passes on to tell the tale with additions in the next street.

By evening it was all over the city that Dilarâm and her like were to be put in gaol for refusing to kidnap girls for the *Sirkar*. And that the *Sirkar* in consequence, being hard put to it, would be sure to make the plague—which the doctors had discovered that very day, though, God knows, folk had been dying that way for a week—an excuse to search respectable houses for recruits to Miss Leezie's profession.

Such a thing may seem impossible to those who have not lived in a native town, but those who have, know that nothing is incredible to its vast curiosity, its still more vast ignorance. In the dead darkness of that, as in the darkness of night, all voices are equal.

And so round the smouldering rubbish-heaps and within the closed doors of the courtyards where the women gathered, as in the bazaar, the tale was told; not with absolute assurance, but tentatively. So folk said; and so, no doubt, it had been in the past. It remained to be seen if it would be so in the present, since *that* was all poor folk had to consider. And as the tale was told, a sound of sudden wailing would rise far or near in the city to prove part of the tale was true.

The plague had come.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FREEDOM OF DEATH

JEHÂN AZIZ had withdrawn his charge of theft against Lateefa by saying that the whole affair was a misunderstanding, and that the ring was in the possession of the Nawâbin, to whom it really belonged. It had been returned to her without his knowledge; *etcetera, etcetera, etcetera!*

Now a monopoly in lies gives freedom, but when you have an accomplice whose fertility of imagination exceeds your own, there is tyranny in them. Jehân found this out when Lateefa, after one silent second of surprise, had grasped the position, and instantly claimed his right to lie also. For in India false accusation is a sort of personal duel in which the challenger, having chosen his weapon, cannot complain of his opponent's more skilful use of it.

So Lateefa had launched into corroborative evidence of the most startling description. Did not the Nawâb-*sahib* remember this, and that? And Jehân had remembered. What else could he do?

But he felt it was dangerous work, and was glad when Lateefa's audience was confined to the coachman who drove them back to the city, in the wagonette lined with red flannel and tied up with string! Yet, all the time that he was enlarging, Lateefa was wondering if there was any truth whatever in the story he had been confirming.

Had the ring really been found?

The fact that Burkut Ali was waiting to receive them in the little house next Dilarâm's, inclined him to believe it was not, and that there was still some scheming afoot.

But, on the other hand, the ring might really be lost. The kite might have fluttered down in the next courtyard, or the next. It was a pure chance.

His first glance into the little backyard, however, showed

him that the chance had been in his favour. He had the eyes of a hawk, and, even from a distance, could see, not only that those were the kites crumpled in one corner, but that the precious morsel of ballast was still in its place.

And this knowledge gave him, instantly, an enormous advantage over the two plotters, to whom it was, of course, inconceivable that he should, already, know for a certainty that the ring had not been found.

So when, in the most natural manner in the world, they congratulated each other on his being freed from a false accusation in time to allow of his making kites for the annual competition amongst the immediate members of the Royal Family, for what was called the 'Sovereignty of Air,' he assented cheerfully and waited for them to go further. Which they did, by saying that as it was most important to have the best of kites, he had better go back to the old workshop, since the courtyard here was too narrow and sunless to dry the paste and paper quick enough. Indeed, the last kites he had made there had flown askew.

Here Lateefa crossed to the battered ones in the corner, and shook his head over them solemnly. It was true, he said, such kites would ill carry the honour of kings. Yet, since he had none too much leisure—if the trial was to be in two days' time—he would waste no good daylight in moving tools. That could be done at any hour, and leave him half-a-day's work here.

On which Jehân and Burkut winked at each other, thinking it evident that he was falling into the trap, and was manœuvring for an opportunity of getting at his hiding-place. So they gave it to him, discreetly, by playing cards meanwhile on the string bed set this time *within* the room across the doorway; thus combining complete isolation with comparative freedom. Whereat Lateefa smiled to himself.

It was quite a happy little family party, and Lateefa sang, as usual, of 'oughts' and 'naughts' as he worked; sang all the more cheerfully when those two began to yawn.

He kept them at the yawning, out of pure mischief, until it was almost dark; then he piled the kites he had made in the corner, tied his tools into a bundle, and asked the card-players politely to let him pass.

Whereupon, as he knew they would, they closed the door and stripped him. He did not expostulate. He seemed to

think it quite right that they should thus prove the truth of their own words. He had not, he confessed, been sure, before, of the assertion that the ring was in the Nawâbin's possession. He had thought that, perhaps, the Light-of-the Universe had retained it himself. Now it was evident that he had not.

And then, refusing to resume any clothing except a mere waist-cloth of decency, or to take his tools or anything which might cause suspicion to go with him, he went out into the bazaars, leaving those two cursing, and swearing, and wondering if by chance they had hit on the right lie! Had the ring really found its way to the ruined palace which was the only other relic of kingship remaining to the Rightful Heir of all?

And even that possession was burdened by conditions!

It is impossible to overestimate what the loss of absolute power means to men like Jehân Aziz who have nothing to take its place. As a rule, when their personal interests do not clash with their environments, they only grin horribly, and contrive to bear the loss. But when, as Jehân Aziz did, they feel enmeshed in a network of petty limitations, their impotent arrogance finds the position intolerable.

As he flung himself angrily once more on the eternal string bed, he felt that the only thing which would satisfy him was the grip upon his finger of a gold circlet set with a green stone, on which was scratched the kingly legend.

And despite Burkut's help he had failed to get it; as yet—

Meanwhile Lateefa, naked as he was born—save for his rag of decency and an embroidered skull-cap of inexpressibly filthy white muslin set on the oily, grizzled hair that hung in an inward curve about his ears—was at large in the gutters and lanes, feeling the freedom of a bird newly escaped from a cage. His last sense of allegiance to the Nawâb had gone; he had not yet attached himself to the Nawâbin. He did not really care much as to the fate of the ring. It had been more a desire to outmatch their cunning, than any hope of keeping his promise to Khôjee, that had made him transfer the precious ballast—as he had done in the leisure afforded him by that discreet game of cards—from the old kite to a new one, and leave it in the pile. It was a trifle safer there; but, on the other hand, any one might find it at any time. If so, it would be the fault of Fate. Not Lateefa's, as it would

have been had he been foolish enough to try and take the ring, or even the kites with him. That would have been fatal.

So as, with a twopenny-halfpenny wisp of a muslin scarf he borrowed from a friend, superadded to his costume—or the lack of it—and a certain soft brilliance of opium in his eyes, the kitemaker lounged about in the more disreputable quarters of the town, listening to tales and telling them with equal indifference, he was, in a way, the spirit of an Indian bazaar incarnate. Truth had gone from him utterly. In its place had come an impersonal appreciation of the value of vice or virtue as a mere ingredient of anecdote, and an absolute lack of responsibility for the result of his admixture of good and evil.

Therefore, as he sat crouched up in the corner of a frail lady's reception room, fingering a lute which he had found there, and trilling softly of 'oughts' and 'naughts' while she retailed the latest lies to the shifting audience which came and went up and down the steep musk-scented stairs, he was at once a thing dreadful, a thing pathetic. For his keen face, seen by the smoking oil lamps set high in a brass trefoil before the mistress of the house, was alight with a sensuous spirituality, and his lean figure, so listless in its lounge, was instinct with that power of energy, of spring, that shows even in a sleeping tiger.

'Lo, thou in the corner!' came the narrator's voice; 'hold thy peace. What are thy "oughts" and "naughts" to us of the bazaar? Take them to thy virtuous beauties who leave messages for thee at Dilarâm's—at Dilarâm's forsooth! an odd "*post-arffis*"[1] for virtue! And so, my masters,' she went on, 'the *daghdars*[2]—there were five of them—carried the woman off by force, and——'

Lateefa was not one of the breathless listeners. He was winking elaborately at the buxom assistant who was handing round the sherbets, and asking irresponsibly, 'Didst leave a message for me at Dilarâm's, beloved?'

'Not I, fool!' she giggled; 'thou must be drunk indeed to think virtue fits me. Yet it is true. One such *did* come when I was at Dilarâm's with her——' She nodded to the speaker—who, having reached her climax, was becoming

[1] Post-office. [2] Doctors.

dramatic, the light before her making her face all eyes and lips—'An old body—out on thee for thy bad taste, Lateef! And she says, says she, "Tell Lateef of the house of the Nawâb that it is well with us in the prison—that we want no service." See you, friends? not even his! Nay, take it not to heart, beloved! there be others less unkind.'

But Lateefa had risen with a sudden sense of something beyond his present freedom; that freedom from truth, clothes, kite-making, above all things, from the methods of the police! And that something was Auntie Khôjee. For the messenger, he felt, could have been no one else. Why had she come to say it was well with her? Had they made her do so? And if so, what had they been doing to those helpless women? What they *could* have done, had they dared, Lateefa knew only too well; and his brain was too confused to remember that *had* they dared, they would scarcely have bidden him go back to his workshop in the old palace.

His feet were as confused as his brain, but, in or out of the gutter, they steered him pretty straight for the big iron-studded door with the little wicket in it beneath the *naubat khana*.

'Khôjee!' he called cautiously, rattling at the wicket; for it was barred, as usual, at night. There was no answer. He raised his voice—'Auntie Khôjee, it is Lateef! Rise, sister, and let me in.'

She ought to have heard that; for he knew her to be a light sleeper. He paused doubtfully. Was she simply asleep, or had those two been at work? Then it occurred to him that he had been a fool not to ask the sherbet-hander *when* the message had been left at Dilarâm's. It might have been that very day, in which case he could afford to postpone his inquiries till the morrow. He must find out. That was the first thing to be done.

Late as it was growing, there was no slackening, as yet, in the tide of life ebbing and flowing through the bazaars, when he returned to them. Everybody in the city seemed astir, and he hastily turned his face to the lamp-sprinkled caverns of the arcaded shops, as he saw Burkut Ali and Jehân Aziz coming towards him in the crowd. They passed him talking together in low tones, and he looked after them doubtfully. Were they simply promenading, as half the town seemed to be doing, or——?

Their sudden turn down a by-lane decided him. He followed cautiously.

Alike though the bazaars and the by-ways of a native city are in form, the change of atmosphere between them is striking beyond words. So here, within a whisper of unceasing talk and movement, Lateefa found all silent, deserted. Lightless too; except when a farthing rushlight at a niched shrine where two lanes crossed, shone on the black slime in the gutters, as if it had been ink, and showed the glistening black streaks upon the windowless walls, down which the sewage from the upper stories of the tall houses trickled to the sewage below. Here and there a dog slunk in the shadows; here and there a woman crept furtively from doorway to doorway. And overhead, with a fathomless depth of purple in which the stars seemed trivial bits of tinsel, a notched ribbon of sky showed between the turreted roofs.

A garland of marigolds—sending their curious odour into the general compound of smells as they hung over a closed door—and a muffled sound of women's laughter told of a marriage within. A knife—still swinging from the touch of the last visitor—and a louder shrill of voices drowning a woman's cries, told of birth. And that faint whimper—practised, conventional—meant death!

All three within closed doors.

And now, from the vantage-ground of the last turn, Lateefa waited and watched those two go on. Had they been there before? Had they the means of entry?

No! The rattle of the wicket sounded loudly; then the voice of authority—'Open! Open to the Master! Open to the Nawâb!'

Even to that there was no answer, and as the two looked at each other, Jehân's face was fierce with rage. ''Tis as thou saidst, when Dilarâm spoke of the message,' he muttered savagely. 'They are in league! Lateef is here, and means to defy us.'

Then he raised his voice and called again, 'Open! Open to the Possessor! Open to the Master!'

A door or two down the alley creaked ajar, showing dim white-sheeted figures of wonder; for that was not a call to be ignored.

Lateefa, from his corner, wondered still more. What could

have happened? Something, evidently, about which those two knew nothing.

A man who had pushed past the dim shadows into the lane, started the question as to when the door had last been seen open; whereat voices came from the dim shadows in answer. One had not seen it so these three days, others had noticed Khôjee's limp that morning. The voices grew contentious over the point, so that Nawâb Jehân Aziz growled a curse under his breath, and turned away savagely.

'Come, Burkut,' he said, 'did I not tell thee they could not have arrived by now? The paper at the "estation" says the mail is "change-time." Let me pass, good folk,' he went on irritably to the little group that hung round, curious. 'Can a body not come to see if his family be returned from a journey without the neighbours crowding out?'

The remark was plausible explanation enough; but as the two passed Lateefa in the dark, Jehân could be heard girding at Burkut. Why had he suggested coming on the sly? It would be all over the town how that Jehân's women had refused him entrance. He, Burkut, would be suggesting the police next.

'Not the police, my lord,' came Burkut's suave, cunning voice; 'there be better ways of gaining entry than that nowadays!'

When they had gone, and the lane—with clucks of incredulity and remarks that it was time some folk refused to be treated scandalously—had settled behind closed doors again, Lateefa stole back to the wicket.

Once more he had the advantage. *He* knew that it was no obstinacy induced by his presence which kept the inmates silent. And Jehân had made noise enough to wake the dead.

The dead? But they could not all be dead! A vast curiosity, more than any apprehension, made Lateefa look up to the balcony of the *naubat khana* and wonder if he could climb to it. Once there, the shutters he knew were rotten. It seemed possible—if a foothold or two were picked out of the crumbling brick, and a rope hitched on to an iron hook he knew of, some ten feet up the wall. In fact, given a quiet hour or so, he would undertake to make a felonious entry somehow. But it was too early in the night to try. The time for such work came with the false dawn when sleep

simulated death. And that was—how many hours away? He did not know, or care. In that strange life of the bazaars, night was as day. No question of bed-time entered into it; so, sooner or later, he would see that the hour he waited for had come, by the look on those ribbons of sky between the close-packed houses; that network of sky, following the pattern of the network of streets and alleys, which was all that thousands in the city knew of the heaven above it.

The bazaars were scarcely more empty, when once again he returned to them; but they were less noisy. Many voices had dwindled to one voice; the voice of the tale-teller. Therefore the voice of the most imaginative mind in the assemblage.

Lateefa listened here, listened there, curious, indifferent, receptive; approving—as the East always approves—the voice with authority that speaks not as the scribes.

He wandered here, he wandered there; even, with that absorbing inquisitiveness of his, into the courtyard common to Dilarâm and her neighbours. Her balcony was dark and silent; the police, he told himself, had likely been bothering her. But the light, and the sound of a crank in Govind's room, meant a special edition of lies. Then with his ear to the chink of the door below he could hear Burkut Ali's voice; then Jehân's—louder, shrill with protest or anger. They were quarrelling, likely, over drink or cards.

Yet Burkut was sober enough when—barely giving time for Lateefa to find shelter behind the eternal string-bed which was now reared up against the wall—he came out into the yard.

'Fool!' he muttered as he passed, 'not to see his own good. As if it mattered. He would get house and all. Mayhap he will be drunk enough by morning.'

What new villainy was he planning? Lateefa pondered over the question as he drifted on.

The time of felonies was near, for the dogs were forgetting to skulk; a sign that men were fewer in the lanes and streets. Here and there, round an ebbing flicker of light, listeners lingered, and a drowsy voice droned on; but for the most part the cavernous arcades showed still, white-swathed sleepers, simulating death.

This, however, coming swiftly down the bazaar—a strange, swaying, headless body with many legs, monstrous, weird, half-seen—was death itself being shuffled out secretly to the city gates.

Folks said true, then. The plague *was* abroad!

He had found himself what he needed for his task—a bit of old iron, a bit of leathern rope; but when he reached the wicket his first stealthy touch on it showed him he needed neither. It was ajar. He pushed it open noiselessly and entered; groping his way, since it was dark in the archway below the *naubut khana*. Beyond, in the open court, it was lighter; yet, even so, he stumbled over a bed set right in the entrance as watchmen set them.

There was no one in it, but the quilt was warm. So some one had been there a moment ago. Some one who had gone out by the open door, and who would therefore return.

He crouched in a recess by the stairs that led upwards and waited. He had not to wait long. A shuffling step sounded outside, and, after a pause to bar the wicket, some one stumbled to the bed. And then out of the darkness came a quavering grace before meat, that grace which is also the prayer of blood-sacrifice.

'In the name of the Merciful and Clement God!'

It had not needed the grace to tell Lateefa that this was Aunt Khôjee. She must have gone out to draw water from the well down the lane, for the grace was followed by the sound of rapid, thirsty drinking. But why had she not drawn water as usual from the well in the women's court-yard? He must find out.

'God quench thy thirst, sister,' he said piously; then added, 'fear not, it is I, Lateef,' for she had given a startled cry and let fall the water-vessel, which, bottom upwards, gave out a *glug glug* as the liquid escaped from its narrow neck, that was louder than her feeble attempt at sobbing, as she crouched up on the bed rocking to and fro.

It was all her fault, she was very wicked, she moaned; she had tried to go into the streets, she had tried to feel as if she were going to die, but she could not. And then the thirst had been so dreadful! But she had only opened the door for a little moment. Who would have thought of any one stepping in? And now he must go away, or she would kill him too. Why did he not go when it was the plague? He would surely die, and she did not want to kill any one else. . . .

Lateefa could make out enough of her ramblings for comprehension, but he did not therefore flinch from the huddled-

up figure, which was now faintly visible in the grey beginnings of dawn. The fear of death is not easily learned in the bazaars where, so long as it comes naturally, it scarcely excites comment. Nevertheless, he cleared his throat and spat as Jân-Ali-shân had done in the garden; for that propitiatory offering to the dread destroyer is common to all races all over the world.

'Thou wouldst kill no more?' he echoed, his curiosity aroused. 'Who hast killed already? The Nawâbin or Khâdjee, or both?'

So once more, even there, he sat listening, listening, listening, while Khôjee rambled through her tale of the green satin trousers, and her plan to save the Nawâbin from being dragged away and poisoned, which had been frustrated by thirst. But who could have expected to want either food or drink——

Lateefa gave a sudden laugh. 'Lo! brave one!' he said, stooping to pick up the fallen water-vessel, 'and when thou hadst got the drink, thou didst spill it from sheer fright of a familiar voice! Of a truth, sister, women are made in bits like a conjurer's puzzle. It needs a man's wit to piece them together. Now think not, Khôjee,' he continued warningly, 'to shut me out whilst I get thee water. If thou dost, I swear by my kites, I will go tell the *daghdars* at the *horspitâl* to come and poison Noormahal.'

The fantasy of his own threat amused him; yet it roused a sudden remembrance that others might, at least, tell the doctors; especially if, after the scene of last night, the door remained shut. The neighbours, in that case, would begin to talk. And then he recollected Burkut Ali's words, and wondered if the latter could possibly have been contemplating so vile a plan as giving false information. The Nawâb himself would not consent. It was infamy. But if the Nawâb was drunk?

The thought was disturbing, so, after Khôjee, refreshed by the water, had apparently sunk into a profound sleep, he went outside, and, sitting on the door-lintel, prepared replies to the questionings which should surely come when folk began to go backwards and forwards to the well. He prepared, also, for the interview with the Nawâbin which he meant to have by and by. He meant to tell her about the ring, as an inducement to common-sense; the common-sense of escaping, while she could, from evil to come.

As he sat, answering questions and passing the time of day jauntily, he heard a faint knocking from within, a low-voiced 'Khôjee! Khôjee! art returned yet?' The Nawâbin was therefore well; so, if Khôjee woke the better for her sleep, the whole affair might be simple.

The sun rose, and so did Lateefa's spirits. He joked and laughed with the veiled serving-women, he played with the children when they began to drift out to the gutters, he even cast a gay remark or two into the air for the women who stood on the roofs gossiping. Soon they would be going down into the courtyards, the doors would be closed, and his opportunity for arguing the matter out with two foolish creatures would come.

Then, suddenly, the children stopped playing, the women scuttled to shelter, and Lateefa rose with an awful malediction in his heart.

Two Englishmen had come round the corner, and behind them was Burkut Ali.

Then he had done it! done this infamous thing!— — —

'It is a nuisance coming at the very beginning,' the English doctor was saying, 'but I can't help myself. And one can only hope it will give the lot a wholesome fright.'

His companion shook his head. 'Doubt it. And to tell the truth, I don't understand this request. There is hanky-panky, I feel sure.'

The speaker was Jack Raymond. By pure chance he had passed the hospital on his morning ride just as the doctor was going out on this, his first search; and, remembering the scene in the king's pleasure-grounds, the latter had asked him to run his eye over the written request for inspection, so as to make sure there was no nonsense.

Thus the names of Khôjeeya and Khâdeeja had come to remind him of the silk bracelet, at that moment reposing with some bank-notes in his pocket. It was not in Jack Raymond to refuse such a lead over. He had felt, it is true, a trifle impatient at the necessity for accepting it, but even that feeling had vanished when Burkut Ali, who met them where the lane turned off from the bazaar, apologised for the Nawâb's absence. The latter was too much overcome, he said, by the sacrifice of dignity required in thus proving his devotion to the *Sirkar* in setting such a good example to others, to attend in person.

'Hanky-panky!' Jack Raymond had murmured under his breath, with a thanksgiving that he was there to prevent more villainy than could be helped.

Lateefa too, seeing *Rahmân-sahib*, who was known to all attendants at the race-course, was glad of his presence also, but for a curiously different reason. He was glad, because *Rahmân-sahib* was, by repute, not only a real *sahib*, but, by repute also, he understood what people said thoroughly, and was therefore amenable to deception—that is to words generally, true or false; whereas wit was of no use with most Englishmen!

Jack Raymond's first remark, too, was reassuring, since it betrayed suspicion of Burkut Ali's good faith.

'The door is *not* closed against entrance,' he said sharply. 'Why was it said to be so?'

Burkut, who had brought a most venerable-looking villain of the royal house to back him up, appealed to the neighbours, who, already, had crowded out to join the rabble which the efforts of a couple of constables had not succeeded in keeping back. Were they not witness, he asked, that last night——

'It doesn't matter, Raymond,' said the doctor aside, 'I've got to get through with it now, and the quicker the better; so I'd rather have an open door than a shut one.' He slipped through the wicket as he spoke, and an odd murmur, half of horror, half satisfied curiosity, ran round the spectators.

It was true, then! The *Sirkar* did do such things!

'There is no need for those two to come in; it isn't their house,' objected Jack Raymond, as Burkut and the venerable villain prepared to follow. 'Stand back, *sahibân*,' he added in Hindustani; 'and sergeant, when the conservancy sweepers are through, close the wicket. This is not a public spectacle.'

True. Yet in a way the remark and action, spoken and done with the best intention, the kindest consideration, were a mistake. They left a crowd with nothing for its amusement but Khôjee's screams of sheer terror as she woke to find the doctor feeling her pulse. They were heart-rending, dangerous screams; and Jack Raymond recognising this, and also the fact that the old lady was his petitioner of the garden, supplemented the doctor's commonplace 'Have no fear, mother' with something more ornate, in Persian, which changed the screams to piteous cries of, 'Poison me not! I will die! Yea, I will die without poison!'

And this being almost worse, he tried the effect of showing her the *râm rucki*, and asking if a bracelet-brother was likely to do her any injury; finally, as she only seemed to grasp his meaning vaguely, he fastened the silken cord on her wrist.

Its touch was magical. She clutched at the hand that had put it on, and the cries died down to a whimper.

'Lo, my brother! Lo, my brother, my brother! Tell them I can die. Let them give me time, and I will die! Yea, with time I can die, as well as with poison.'

It was impossible to avoid a smile; the doctor, indeed, laughed cheerily. 'No doubt about that, mother,' he said to her in a relieved tone of voice, 'but not just yet. You haven't got the plague. And you haven't it either,' he continued, turning to Lateefa. 'That is two of you—one woman and a servant. Now, if you can show me the other two inmates in like case, I can give a clean bill. So where are they? In here, I suppose.'

He passed towards the inner door, but Lateefa was there before him. Sharp as a needle, the doctor's words had made him see that Noormahal, alone, would be no good. There must be two women, or the tragedy of the green satin trousers would be as surely discovered as if poor Khâdjee had not been buried; and that would mean a segregation camp, at best, for all three of them. It might be impossible to hoodwink the *sahibs*, but he could try. So he appealed volubly to Jack Raymond. This was infamy, as the *Huzoor* knew, to secluded dames. It had to be, of course; but let it be done in the easiest way. Let the sick woman—she was none so ill but that she could do so much for humanity's sake—go in first and tell of the *Huzoor*'s kindness; of how he was a bracelet-brother (Lateefa had, of course, grasped this fact without in the least understanding how it had happened); no doubt she would be able to persuade the secluded ones to come out for inspection, and that would be less disgrace than the invasion by male things of their sacred isolation.

Jack Raymond watched the keen audacious face narrowly; then once more he said aside to the doctor, 'Hanky-panky! That sick woman is as much secluded as the others; but I'd let her go. Give them a free hand and they will be quieter, if we find them out. Anything is better than hunting them down, poor souls!'

Lateefa, therefore, much to his inward delight—also con-

tempt!—was allowed free instructions to Aunt Khôjee, while the search-party stood aside.

'We can't let 'em down easier, can we?' said the doctor as he waited; and Jack Raymond shook his head despondently.

'No,' he answered, 'but it's a brutal business all the same—to their notions, and you can't change *them* in a hurry.'

Meanwhile Lateefa's instructions ran in this fashion. Khôjee was to tell Noormahal that the big Lord-*sahib* had sent the bracelet-brother to fetch her to a private interview. That the state *dhoolies* were waiting. That all was of the strictest ceremonial. On that point she had a free hand. She was to say anything which would induce the Nawâbin to come out. And she herself was to change her dress swiftly and personate Khâdjee. It was a chance—the *Huzoors* might not think of seeing the three women together. So, with a parting admonition to be brave, he pushed the tottering Khôjee through the inner door, closed it, and turned to the two Englishmen appealingly.

'The *Huzoors* must give time, for it is as death to noble ladies to see strangers; but the old woman will tell them that the *Huzoors* are as their fathers and mothers. May God promote them to be Lords!'

'Hanky-panky!' remarked Jack Raymond again, 'but it can't do any harm.'

'No,' assented the doctor.

There was no one there to remind them that that is a formula which can never be safely used in India, or to repeat, as Grace Arbuthnot had repeated, a lifelong experience embodied in the words—'You can never tell.'

'They are a long time coming,' said the doctor aggrievedly. He was up to his eyes in work, and he had waited five minutes, ten minutes, patiently, silently. So had the crowd outside silently, but impatiently.

'*Huzoor!*' protested Lateefa from the door, 'to noble ladies it is as death——'

He broke off, for a sudden shriek rose from within; another; another; and above them a woman's voice shrill, awful, in its intensity of scorn—

'Lies! Lies! Lies! Stand back, fool, thief, liar!' And mixed with these words were others in agonised appeal—'Nay! Noormahal! Lateef! Help! God and his prophet! Thou shalt not! Noormahal!'

Lateefa seemed paralysed—uncertain what to do. But Jack Raymond, the doctor at his heels, had the door open. They were through it in a second. His first glance within, however, made the former grip the latter's arm with a grip of iron, and whisper breathlessly—

'Keep still, man; it 's the only chance.'

For, in the centre of that inner courtyard, standing—arrested for a second by the opening of the door—on the parapet of the wide wall, was a tall white-robed figure, its face distorted by passion, its black eyes blazing.

'Lateef! Help!' moaned Khôjee, who was clinging frantically, uselessly, to one corner of the long white veil. 'She is mad! the ring!—I had to dress—and she too—for the Lord-*sahib*—and it was not there! I told you how it would be—it is the ring!'

An awful laugh echoed through the courtyard.

'Yea! the ring! the ring!' repeated Noormahal mockingly. 'Sa'adut's ring—the Ring of Kingship. Liar! Lo! I could kill thee for the lie. It is not there—Noormahal! Mother of Kings, dost hear? It is not there—it was not there when I went to find it.'

There was self-pity, amazement, now, in the voice which had begun so recklessly, and Jack Raymond—watching the figure with every nerve and muscle tense for action—breathed a quick breath of relief; for self-pity meant almost the only hope of averting the mad leap there was so little chance of preventing.

But Lateefa's high voice followed sharply, almost exultingly—

'What then?' he cried, 'when I have it safe! Yea! Mother of Kings! The ring is safe. I swear it. I have it yonder in the bazaar—in the Nawâb's house—I——'

He paused, compelled to silence by her face, by the outstretched hand which, falling from its appeal to high Heaven, pointed its finger at him accusingly.

'Dost hear him?' she asked mincingly, and Jack Raymond instinctively moved a step nearer. 'He, the pandar, hath the ring safe; safe in the bazaar; safe in the Nawâb's house; safe for the Nawâb's bride——'

'Look out!' shouted Jack Raymond, dashing forward, for he knew what that thought would bring.

But he was too late. With one cry of 'Liars,' one horrid

laugh, the slender white figure leaped into the air, the veil—detained uselessly in Khôjee's helpless hold—falling from the small sleek head; and the Nawâbin Noormahal, the Light-of-Palaces, went down as she had stood, mocking, defiant, into the depth of the well; the last thing seen of her, those wild appealing hands.

And outside the crowd was listening, eager to find fault, eager for a tragedy to tell in the bazaars.

CHAPTER XIX

ON THE BED ROCK

'My dear Chris, if you insist on going to see your mother in that horrid filthy city where, every one knows, the plague has regularly begun,' said Mrs. Chris Davenant to her husband, 'I won't stop in your house. That's an end of it. I don't see why I should. Of course, if it was your duty to inspect, and that sort of thing, I'd have to grin and bear it. But it isn't; so you can't expect me to run the risk.'

'It is my duty to see my mother,' replied Chris, with that faint pomp which is inseparable in the native from a virtuous sentiment, be it ever so trite.

She laughed, quite good-naturedly. 'The fact is, Chris, you've an awkward team of duties to drive; but a man's got to leave his father and mother, you know. Not that I want you to leave yours. Go to her, by all means, if you want to, but in that case I shall go where *I* want.'

'And where is that?' he asked almost fiercely.

She laughed again. 'To the hotel, of course. My dear Chris, I am not a fool. Not as a rule, I mean, though I was one, of course, when I married you. But you were a greater fool in marrying me; for you *knew* you were a bit of a prig, and I didn't! However, let's drop that, though, as I've told you before, the best thing for you to do would be to let me slide and marry your cousin——'

'Will you hold your tongue,' he burst out, almost as an Englishman might have done, and she raised her eyebrows and nodded approvingly.

'Bravo, Chris! that was very nearly right—but as you don't favour that easy solution, you must stick to me. You can't eat your cake and have it, my dear boy. If you marry a civilised woman, you must behave *as sich*. And civilised people don't run the risk of infection needlessly. They don't

go and see their relations if——though of course no civilised person's mother would live in a dirty plague-stricken town by choice, would she?'

Poor Chris! If he had not been so civilised himself, if he had not been such a good sort, he could have faced the position better; but he saw the justice of hers. 'I think if she were sick'—he began.

She gave a little scream. 'Sick! my dear Chris! that settles it. I can't have you bringing back microbes. It—it isn't fair on *us*, you know. And there are a lot of jolly globe-trotters at the hotel—one of them says he knew me in London.'

There was a world of regret in her tone, and the pity of it, the hideous mistake for *her* came home to Chris. 'There is no reason,' he said, in a sort of despair, 'why I should turn you out of this'—here he gave a hard sort of laugh—'I don't really care for it, you know, Viva, though I used to think I did. So you had better stop here, and—I'll—I'll go.'

The pity of the hideous mistake for *him* came home even to her. 'Where?' she asked. 'You won't go and live in that awful city—you mustn't do that. You're not like them, you know; you'd die of it.'

He felt it was true; that he belonged to No-man's-land.

'Perhaps that would be the best solution of the difficulty,' he said gloomily, with a sententiousness which quite took the pathos from the remark.

She looked at him gloomily in her turn, with a certain exasperation. 'Oh! if you want to, of course; but, my dear Chris, do you really think I'm worth that sort of thing; from your point of view, I mean?'

Something about her as she stood, dainty as ever, reminded him of those days in the boarding-house down the Hammersmith Road, when India, and that part of himself which belonged to India, had seemed so very far off. He took a step nearer to her.

'You might be, Viva, you might be.'

She drew back. 'In fifty years' time, perhaps,' she replied shrewdly—for, as she said, she was no fool. 'Why, Chris! can't you see that you have just gone dotty over the new idea of woman as a helpmeet, and companion, and that sort of "biz." And I—why—we girls have left it behind us a bit in England, nowadays.'

The fatal truth of her remarks invariably silenced Chris, born as he was of a long line of men to whom argument was a religion.

'Well! good-bye, Viva, I will try and not trouble you any more,' he said, accepting defeat with a pang of remorse at his own readiness to do so, at the sense of relief which would not be ignored.

She shrugged her shoulders. 'Don't be so tragic, please. And remember I didn't send you away. You want to go visiting your mother in the city, and I'm quite willing you should, provided you take proper precautions; so good-bye, and take care of yourself. There is nothing to worry about. You are up to the ropes there, and I am up to them here, so there is no harm done.'

Chris, however, as he packed a portmanteau of necessaries, felt that though this might be true for the present, and though—so far as she was concerned—it might even remain true, it was a different affair for him; there was danger ahead in his future.

And this became more and more certain, as, in packing, he had to decide on what were necessaries and what were not. For that depended so much on the sort of life you were going to lead. And what sort of life *was* he going to lead?

He ended by taking very little; but amongst that little were two things which, though they both contained the staple of life—common corn—could scarcely be called necessaries. Man, however, does not live by bread alone.

So he put these and himself into a hired green box on wheels, and drove to a lodging he knew of, close to the city, yet not of it. It was in the upper part of a house used as a meeting-place by the Brahmo Somaj, who, by this means, paid the rent of the quaint, semi-Europeanised building. It stood in a bit of garden, thick with plantains, between which two straight mud walks and a curved one showed curiously black and damp, as if the soil was sodden with sewage, as it may have been. But upstairs, when the green shutters were thrown back, it was fresh and breezy enough.

A Brahmo-Somaj clerk in the railway, whom Chris knew and liked, had quarters on the ground floor in consideration of his services as secretary, and with his help Chris soon found himself settled in. A bed, a table, a chair—the last two doubtfully desirable—completed the furniture, and left

a delightful sense of space and freedom in the wide empty room. He had escaped, he felt, from Shark Lane. Surely from this standpoint it might be possible to be sincere. Here it might be possible to reconcile himself to his environment, his environment to himself.

He took off his European dress, not from any distaste to it, but because he knew it to be an absolute barrier between him and his desire. So, in the ordinary costume of a native clerk, he strolled out to pass the time till he could safely go and see his mother; safely, because she lived amongst the strictest of neighbours, whom he did not wish to meet—as yet. That might be afterwards, but not now. It was already growing dusk—for he had changed his quarters after the day's work was over—but the irregular sort of bazaar between him and one of the city gates had not yet begun to twinkle with little lights after its usual fashion. Indeed, many of the shops were closed. Yet there was no lack of possible customers. The roadway was crowded with all sorts and conditions of men. It suddenly struck him that nearly all were coming towards him; therefore there must be some attraction behind him. He turned and drifted with the tide until, after a few hundred yards, he saw ahead of him to one side of the road, a dim clump of stunted trees, with a red rag on a stick tied to the topmost branch, and, showing in a soft yellow radiance which rose from the ground, a glint of white tombs among the lower ones. Then he remembered—an odd regret that he should have forgotten something which to his childhood had been all-important, coming with the remembrance—that this must be the day of Sheikh Chilli's fair, which was held every year at this shrine; Sheikh Chilli, the pantaloon of India; the man of straw, the lover's dupe, the butt of every one; the type which, in varying form, plays its part in the serio-comic tragedy of sex all over the world. Sheikh Chilli, whose beard any one can pull, whose wife is never his own, whom a child can deceive.

Perhaps that was the reason, Chris thought, why, as a child, Sheikh Chilli's fair had been such a supreme occasion; that and the toys—those toys which, as it were, set Nushapore the fashion in playthings for a whole year. And that meant something, since the two hundred and odd thousand people in the city, idlers by inheritance, were great in the manufacture of toys.

Chris, who had not seen a Sheikh Chilli fair for years, went forward eagerly as a child himself, the whole scene coming back to him with absolute familiarity: the rows of little lights set on the ground to mark the streets, and behind them, ranged in squares, the toys; thousands of them, millions of them; baked mud, bent bamboo, curled cotton; soda-water corks, match-boxes, even brass cartridges, all pressed into the service by a truly marvellous ingenuity. And between the lights, along the paths, jammed almost to solidity by the barriers of toys, humanity of all sorts and sizes, seen in that curious soft radiance rising from the earth below its feet! humanity trying to pause and admire, trying to pause and laugh; helpless for either when standing, and driven to gain absolute solidity by squatting down and letting the stream sweep over it.

A group of dancing-girls showed on the flat plinth of the shrine; musicians strummed here and there; here and there a conjurer essayed tricks. But all this was trivial beside the toys.

Yet they were still more trivial: one for a farthing, two for a farthing, even three for a farthing if you chose mud monkeys, or brass rings made out of sliced cartridge-cases set with drops of blue or red sealing-wax.

'Lo!' came the voices of peasants in for the show. 'See to that! That is new!' And some grave-faced husbandman would buy a sort of Mercury's *caduceus* made of bamboo, with two writhing, twisting snakes to it, fearfully, horribly alive.

This piece of ingenuity, indeed, ran a couple of cotton-wool bears who chased each other endlessly over a loop of bamboo, close for the pride of first place in the fair; a place for which there was keen competition. So that, whenever any toy seemed to hit the fancy, there were instantly trays of it being hawked about above the crush, above the soft light, with the cry—'The best in the fair, one farthing! one farthing for the best in the fair!'

Chris, caught in the crowd, drifted on with it, wondering, as he had wondered as a child, which of the many claimants up aloft in the semi-darkness was the true one. It was a strangely absorbing wonder; but then the whole scene was absorbingly unlike anything else in the world. It was humanity herded by toys, limited by them, forced to go one way, and one way only, by them!

The rows of little flickering lamps between the two seemed as if they were shaking with silent laughter at the sight.

'The best in the fair! one farthing! One farthing for the best in the fair!'

The cry came this time with something that was hardly a toy, and yet hands were stretched out to buy it. Chris, tall enough to see over the heads of his neighbours, noticed that more trays, full of this something, were being hawked on all sides.

It was only a hank of the coarse ring-streaked cotton thread used in betrothals as an amulet for the bridegroom's wrist, and for plaiting into the bride's hair. Attached to it was a thin brass medal, apparently cut out of a cartridge case, and shaped like the talisman a second wife wears as a safeguard against the machinations of the first. It was stamped, Chris found on buying one, with what seemed, at first, a crescent and a cross; but a closer look showed him that the latter was a *swastika*, or death-mark. In other words, the equal-limbed cross with bent ends. Below that again was a sort of Broad Arrow.

'The best in the fair! Safety for females! Victoria Queen's mercifulness! Freedom from tyrannies for one farthing!'

These more elaborate cries came from farther down the serried band of humanity of which Chris was a unit, and so beyond his reach; but, after a while, the steady, glacier-like movement of the whole brought him opposite to what was evidently the home of the amulet; for such the something seemed to be. Here, behind the rows of lamps, thousands of these cotton hanks lay in tangled heaps. Behind them again sat the sellers, raking in money. Every one seemed to buy, even those who did not know what they were buying.

'What is't for?' answered one of the sellers—whom Chris fancied he had seen in some rather different position—to an old man who had bought a whole penny's worth. 'For the plague, of course! Wear it, and none dare come nigh thee. It gives the right to peace.'

'Dost pretend——?' began Chris hotly, when the seller, looking up, interrupted him audaciously—

'I pretend naught, *baboo-jee*,' he replied. 'I sell amulets for what they are worth, a farthing. The rest is God's will. Yet, have not all a right to peace, my masters? Have we

not all the right to live as we have lived? Ay! and to quarrel with those who interfere; above all with those who make promises and break them? Who'll buy? Who'll buy the promise of peace, the freedom from tyranny, the female ruler's mercifulness to females?'

The hands were stretching out on all sides still, as the onward sweep of that human glacier carried Chris beyond the power of argument or denial.

He found the opportunity of both, however, when he joined a group beyond the crush in which he recognised several of his Shark Lane acquaintances. He had not meant to show himself in his present dress to them, but he was eager for sympathy. 'The police ought not to allow that sort of thing,' he said decisively; 'it might lead to—to—trouble.'

'I fail to see your point, sir,' replied a keen-faced lawyer. 'It appears to me to lead to the soothing of groundless terrors. Then the sale of amulets is not prohibited by law. Nor is there fraudulent statement over and above a general appeal to superstition and ignorance, which, alas! are but too common.'

'I join issue with you, sir,' put in another keen face; 'nor, to my mind, is there even *suggestio falsi*. Is not our beloved Queen merciful to females, and has not the Government graciously asserted that there *shall* be no interference with the liberty of the subject?'

Some one behind laughed loudly, a trifle uncontrollably, and a voice, which Chris instantly recognised as Govind the editor's, said jeeringly in Hindustani, '*Alâ! lâlâ-jee!* there is no lack of gracious words! But as I have said ever, as I mean to prove when I choose, there is more than the words in the Lord-*sahib*'s office-box!'

'Prove!' echoed another of the same type who had paused, in passing, to join the group; 'thou art behind the times, Govind! It is proved already. But this morning two Englishmen, on excuse of plague visitation, offered such insult to three virtuous females that with one accord they threw themselves down the well!'

'Impossible!' cried Chris; and not he only, for nearly every man present voiced doubt, if not denial.

'There is no doubt,' reiterated the news-bringer complacently; 'I had it from a man whose uncle was outside.

They closed the doors, and none could enter, despite the women's screams. It was in the Bâdshâhzâi quarter, and the folk have closed their gates and sit in terror.'

'Small wonder!' put in Govind, eager to have his say in horrors; 'it was thence that the girl was abducted the other day. Lo! 'tis a good beginning! What wonder if folk lay hold of amulets and fair promises!'

'I tell you,' asserted Chris passionately, 'it cannot be true. And as for the other story, was it not told on the word of Jehân Aziz, and which of us would trust him? None. Shall we believe him in this, against what we see, and know, of our own senses?'

'We do not believe these stories, sir,' remarked the lawyer pompously. 'False evidence is, alas! a hobby of our ignorant countrymen. There is no doubt a substratum of truth in these stories——'

'No! pleader-*jee*,' interrupted Chris vehemently—the conversation shifted between English and Hindustani in the strangest fashion—'there is no foundation for such stories, and we all know it. There is foundation for mistakes, for wrong enough, God knows—but for such as that, no!'

'Your contention is true,' put in a temperate voice; 'but the difficulty of sifting wheat from chaff is proverbial.'

Once again Chris broke from his like in absolute discouragement. And yet what could he do to dissociate himself from their policy of non-interference? Absolutely nothing. Here, in this world mapped out by toys, with that soft unsteady brilliance rising from about men's feet, he could not even hope to rouse dissent. That onward glacier-like sweep, full of outstretched hands buying a piceworth of promises, would pass by him and his words, unheeding of either.

And, after all, the lawyer was right so far. That miserable strand of the wedding-skein which links man and woman—that trumpery brass cartridge-case medal, rudely stamped with the Hindoo death-mark, the Mohammedan faith-mark, and the English possession-mark—would carry comfort and calm to many a hearth.

And yet the promise that could not be kept was dangerous. He must write of that to Mr. Raymond. And then the question came, Why should he? Why should he, who had no voice at all in his own country's welfare, help those

who thought they could dispense with the services of such as he?

The clock, striking nine from the tall Italian campanile on which some past bureaucrat had spent money that might have been better used, warned him that if he was to write that evening he must do it at once; but it warned him also that it was time he went to his mother's.

Should he, should he not?

It was no sense of duty which decided him. It was the remembrance that if he went back to his lodging, he could kill two birds with one stone. He could not only write the warning, but also put a certain small rose-scented, rose-satin-covered boxlet and a paper of corn in his pocket, in case Naraini, poor little soul, needed comforting.

Something that was not Eastern or Western, but simply human, surged up in him as he thought of what her face would be when he proved to her that, so far from being angry at her throwing the corn into the gutter, he had gathered it up—every grain!

He had not told his mother that he had done so; that is not the sort of information sons give their mothers, East or West.

But he meant to tell Naraini!

He ran up the brick stairs which led from outside to the upper story lightly as a boy, feeling a sort of exultation in his new freedom of circumstance. He had purposely brought no servant with him, for *they*, he knew, would have brought Shark Lane with *them*, and he wished to forget its ways and works for a time. So he had determined to engage a new and uncontaminated attendant on the morrow. One consequence of this, however, was that his room was dark to-day!

He stood on its threshold feeling, of a sudden, strangely forlorn and lost. Then he pulled himself together sharply. What a trivial thing is man, that even the lack of a bedroom candle should discourage him! On the threshold, too, of a new life! Especially when he had not so far forsaken civilisation as to be without wax vestas!

He lit one after another, laboriously, and managed by their light to scrawl a short note to Jack Raymond. Then he rummaged in his portmanteau for the rose-scented box, trusting more to touch and smell than sight, until, having found it, he laid it beside him on the floor in order to relock

the portmanteau, ere leaving the room to take care of itself. And then? Then a travelling-inkstand and the little casket got mixed up in the darkness, and he became conscious of something wet on his hands.

He swore—in English—and lit another match. The rose-coloured box was uninjured, but his fingers were hopeless. He turned naturally to soap, water, towels; and found none.

There was the well in the compound, of course, but—he swore again. Then, half inclined to laugh half to frown, at the annoyance he felt, he began to feel his way towards the stairs. As he did so, a chink of light at the bottom of a door, farther down the wider roof of the lower story from which the upper rooms rose, arrested him. He might beg for a wash there. A voice answered his knock. He opened the door and went in; then stood petrified.

Seated on a chair facing him, his legs very wide apart, a bit of looking-glass in one hand, a brush in the other, Jân-Ali-shân was putting the finishing touches to an elaborate parting. He was otherwise got up to the nines in an old dress-suit, which he had picked up for the half of nothing at an officer's sale. His white tie and shirt-front were irreproachable; he had a flower in his buttonhole. The only discordant note was a reminiscent odour of patchouli.

He paused, awestruck — hair-brush and looking-glass severed from each other by the width of his arm-stretch—at the sight of his superior officer in native costume.

'Well! I—am—eternally'—his present and future state was evidently an uncertainty, but he finally said, a trifle doubtfully—'blessed!'

Then he rose, and accepted the situation with his usual confidential cheerfulness.

'Beg pardin, sir,' he explained, 'titivatin' for a 'op. The girls like it, an' you likes yourself; so it's all round my 'at for the lot o' us, an' a straight tip to "England expec's every man to do 'is dooty." An' wot was you please to want, sir?'

Chris paused in his turn for a second; then followed suit in confidential explanation. 'I want to wash my hands, please. You are wondering how I got here—in—in this dress. I came to the room over there this afternoon, because —my mother is sick, Ellison, and I want to be near her, and see her.'

Jân-Ali-shân's face expressed unqualified approval. 'Right

you are, sir!' he said. 'I disremember mine, seein' she went out as I come in; but I know this, sir—I've missed 'er all my life—an' shall do, please God, till I die.' He had gone to the washhand-stand and was making elaborate preparations with soap and a clean towel. 'Lor' bless you, sir!' he went on, 'I'd 'ave 'ad cleaner 'ands myself to-day if she'd bin there to smack 'em w'en I was a hinfant. She's powerful for horderin' a man's ways, sir, is a mother.'

And as he resumed his interrupted occupation, thus leaving Chris unobserved, he hummed 'My mother bids me bind my hair' with a superfluity of grace-notes.

'And I want also,' went on Chris, recovering his lost sense of dignity under the effects of a nail-brush and a piece of pumice-stone—he had often noticed Jân-Ali-shân's hands and wondered at their tidiness for a working man's—'to find out the state of feeling in the city. From what I hear people are saying—and you must hear a lot too——'

Jân-Ali-shân laid down the brush and the looking-glass. 'Hear?' he echoed, 'Lor' love you, they don't tell me them tales. I'm a *sahib*, I am. An' I wouldn't listen if they did. 'Tisn't as if we 'ad to do with words ourselves; but we ain't. "By their works shall ye know them," as it say in 'Oly Writ; an' if it come to that, sir, why, they shall know 'oo's 'oo in John Ellison. An' now, sir, if you've done, I'll light you down them stairs, for of all the inconsiderate, on-Christian stairs a 'eathen ever built, them's the most disconcertin' in the "stilly night."' There was pure pathos in the voice that wandered off into the song.

'I didn't know you lived here, Ellison,' said Chris, following cautiously. 'You were in another house when I——'

A chuckle was wafted back from the candle. 'W'en 'Oneyman titivated in dress bags! If you'll excuse me, sir, that story's bin worth a fiver to me nigger-minstreling, as Bones. I don't give no names, sir; but you should 'ear the Tommies laugh! No offence, sir, but it do tell awful comic, and they needs perkin' up a bit, pore lads, in them beastly barracks. Better 'n the bazaar for 'em any'ow, so that's something due to 'Oneyman, ain't it? Yes, sir!' he went on, still piloting the way towards the gate, 'I left them diggin's soon's I could pay a better lot, for I likes a bit o' 'ome, sir, an' a bit o' furniture. "An' who shall dare to chide me for lovin' an old arm-chair?" That's about it, sir. The "'appy

'omes of Hengland," and Hingia too, sir,' he added, as, after blowing out the end of candle and putting it into his pocket for future use, he paused to say—'Good-night, sir, an' I 'ope you 'll find the good lady better.'

'Good-night, Ellison, I hope you 'll enjoy yourself.'

Jân-Ali-shân gave an odd, half-sheepish laugh. 'An' oughter, sir; she 's an awful nice girl, an' not a drop o' black blood in 'er veins—beggin' your pardin, sir, but you know 'ow 'tis.'

'Yes!' said Chris suddenly, 'I know how it is.'

He knew better than he had ever known before, when hours afterwards—his blood running like new wine in his veins—he came back from the city and stumbled up to his room.

The stairs were certainly, as John Ellison had said, most inconsiderate. Yet one stumble was not due to them, but to John Ellison himself, who was crumpled up, snoring peacefully, at the most difficult turn.

'Hillo!' he said conclusively, after a prolonged stare at Chris, made possible by another resort to wax vestas on the latter's part, 'Is that you, sonny?' And then he wandered off melodiously into the parody—

'My mother bids me dye my hair the fashionable hue.'

When Chris had seen his subordinate safe to bed, he made free with the bit of candle-end for his own use.

And by its light he saw his letter to Jack Raymond lying forgotten on the floor in a half-dried pool of ink.

'I cannot send that one, anyhow,' he said to himself as he tore it up. But he felt as if he could send nothing—that he could never give another thought to such things. For Naraini had needed comfort, and he had given it to her. But he could not even think of her; a profound physical content lulled him to a dreamless sleep, his last thought, ere that sleep claimed him, being that he had not felt so happy for years.

CHAPTER XX

THE OLD WINE

CHRIS woke suddenly, and yet without that sense of dislocation which such awakening often brings with it.

The vast content that had been his in falling asleep was his still, as with eyes which seemed to him to have grown clear of dreams he lay smiling at what he saw, though that was only a wide, empty, whitewashed room with many window-doors set open to the dawn; and through these, nothing but a strip of mud roof; and beyond that again, the broad blades of the plantain leaves shining grey-green in the grey light. A slight breeze swayed them, and rustled in the frayed straws of the rude matting with which the floor was covered.

But that louder, more intermittent rustle was not the wind. It was the patter of a bird's feet. And there, with tail erect on the coping, clear against the glistening grey-green leaves, which swayed like sea-weeds in a swift tide, a striped squirrel was breakfasting on some treasure-trove.

Chris filled his lungs with a long breath. He was back in the old world; the world where all living things are alike mortal, where even man is as the flower that fadeth, the beast that perisheth.

And the old way was better.

So far he had gone, when the consciousness that he was not alone—that strange consciousness of humanity which, be the old way never so charming, separates men from it inevitably—came to him, and he sat up on the low string cot, set so regardless of symmetry just where it had first been dumped down in the room.

His instinct had been right. A figure had been seated, unmovable as a statue, just behind his head; but as he turned it turned also, and held out a folded paper. The figure was

that of a young man about his own age and of much the same build, but guiltless of clothing save for a saffron-coloured waist-cloth. The forehead was barred with white lines, and a leopard's skin hung over the shoulder. Palpably this was the disciple of some learned ascetic, as he, Chris, would have been, had not the West interfered with custom. The thought made him smile, but the face opposite his remained grave, almost disapproving; the figure rose without a word, turned on its heel, and disappeared. Chris, left with the paper in his hand, felt as if a message had been sent to him from another world; felt so still more when he had read the broad black Sanskrit lettering inside.

'Thy *guru* calls thee'—it ran—'come, ere it be too late.'

He sat staring at the words, conscious—despite his better sense—of a compulsion, almost of fear.

For why had this claim of authority been made now? Wherefore should the *guru*—that is, the spiritual adviser of his family—desire to see him?

The answer was but too plain; he must already know of that stolen visit Chris had made to his mother's house; a visit which, should one, who was her spiritual guide also, choose to proclaim it, might bring endless trouble, vexation, disgrace upon her.

Chris stood up, inwardly cursing his own recklessness. He might, he told himself, have known that priestly spies would be about him after that incident of the bathing-steps. He ought not to have gone; not at least as he *had* gone, leaving his mother still in her fond belief that he had done, or was willing to do, the necessary penance.

Yet without that belief—strengthened as it had been by his repeated requests for secrecy in the present—she would not have received him as she had. And Naraini——

Plainly he must obey the order, and so find out what was wanted, what was threatened. He rose therefore and went out into the cool grey dawn.

The arcaded courtyard recessed about a cluster of temples, where Swâmi Viseshwar Nâth taught his disciples, was empty as yet when Chris reached it, save for half a dozen figures scarce distinguishable from the one which had summoned him. All, in these early hours, were busy over ceremonials of sorts; but all looked up at the newcomer with that dull disapproval.

'The *guru* is within,' said one sullenly.

Chris did not need direction. Had he not learned the precious shibboleths of his twice-born race yonder at the master's feet?

'So thou hast come, Krishn. Take thy seat, pupil, and listen,' came a voice.

It was almost dark in the slip of a room behind the arcades, but Chris could see, by the help of memory, the unmovable figure, the placid face with its wide thin lips. He saw in a flash, also, everything that had ever happened to him in this, his earliest school, and the old awe that comes with such memories fell on him as he obeyed.

'There is no need,' continued the voice, 'to tell thee that I know what thou wouldest rather I did not know. Neither canst thou pretend ignorance of what such knowledge means. Therefore, Krishn, there is naught to say but this. What art thou about to do?'

Chris had been asking himself the question, but he resented its being put to him.

'That depends,' he was beginning, when the Swâmi stopped him by laying an impassive hand on his wrist.

'To save time, I will tell thee. Out of past years—*as thou didst disappear in them*—thou shalt return—*as thou didst go*—Krishn Davenund, Brahmin, twice-born. There shall be no question asked, no answers needed. Thou shalt return to us—I, Viseshwar Nâth, *parohit* of thy race, say it, and none shall quarrel me—thou shalt return to hold a woman's hand, and circle the sacred fire—*her* hand, Naraini's, whom the gods keep for thee, whom I, child, have kept for thee!'

The words with the nameless rhythm in them, which the use of Sanskrit phrases gives to the vulgar tongue, echoed softly into the arches, and Chris felt his eyes, his ears held captive by the insignificant figure that was hedged about by no sign of dignity or office save the leopard skin on which it crouched, naked.

'Kept for me—how so?' he echoed, trying once more to be resentful.

The Swâmi smiled. 'Hast, indeed, forgotten the old life so utterly, boy, as never to have wondered why one of Naraini's age remained virgin in thy mother's house?'

Chris felt the blood go tingling to his face; for he could not pretend to such ignorance. He knew that the limit of

laxity in such matters had almost been overpast in the hope that when he returned from England he would marry the girl. But that possibility had vanished when he had married Viva. Therefore, to blame him for the subsequent delay was unfair; so he answered boldly—

'I have not wondered. I have known and regretted the idle dream. But that was over long ago—ere my father died. Had he chosen, he might——'

The Swâmi's hand stopped him once more. 'Not so,' he said calmly. 'If thou hast forgotten much, there are other things thou hast never known; that none would have known save thy father and I—not even thy mother—hadst thou been dutiful and fulfilled the dream. Listen and reflect! Thy cousin Naraini was betrothed or ever she came to thy father's house, betrothed as an infant to one who—who left her.'

'Left her?' echoed Chris hotly, 'wherefore?'

'That matters not,' replied Viseshwar Nâth; 'there be many reasons, but the result is the same: *if the betrothed be dead, Naraini is widow!*'

In the pause Chris clenched his hands; for he saw whither the wily lips were leading him, and in a flash realised his own impotence if this were true.

'It is a lie!' he muttered helplessly. 'I must—my mother must have known. And my father——' Then memory came to remind him that his father had been a champion of widow remarriage, and he broke off still more helplessly.

'Even so!' continued the Swâmi, not unkindly; 'thy father agreed with me (we of the temple have to keep touch with the world, Krishn). Yea! he gave gold, since that is in thy thought! to hide the wrong. And if he were willing to give her to you, his only son, as wife, wherefore should I speak? No harm was done to others; no deception to ignorant honour. But it was different when he died and thy mother came to me, with heart split in twain between the dream and duty, to speak of another betrothal. So I said then—"Wait yet a while. The gods have mated these two. He may return." That was better, was it not, Krishn, than—than *widowhood* for the girl?'

He leant towards the young man as he spoke the words, his sombre eyes fixed on Chris Davenant's shrinking face. Though the latter had known what was coming, the certainty

of it overwhelmed him. He sat staring breathlessly, with such absolute paralysis of nerve and muscle that a damp sweat showed on his forehead, as on the foreheads of those who are in the grip of death.

And widowhood was worse than death. It would be a living death to Naraini — Naraini with her little rose-coloured, rose-scented casket.

'Which is it to be, my pupil?' came the Swâmi's voice, swift and keen as a knife-thrust. 'Widowhood, or marriage?'

Chris buried his face in his hands with a groan; then he looked up suddenly. 'Why?' he began, and ended. Appeal he knew was useless; but he might at least know why this choice was forced on him, for choice it was. His had been in the eye of the law a mixed marriage—his right as Hindoo remained in India.

The Swâmi's lean brown hand was on his wrist again, but it was no longer impassive; it seemed to hold and claim him almost passionately.

'Because we of the temple need such as thou art, my son, in these new days when the old faith is assailed—ay! even by such as Râm Nâth, low-born, with his talk of ancient wisdom, his cult of Western ways hidden in the old teachings, his cult of the East blazoned in the outside husks of truth—the husks that we of the inner life set at their proper value! But thou art of us! Deny it not—the blood in thee thrills to thy finger-tips even as I speak. Thou art of us! and thy voice trembled in that dawn over the *gayatri* thou hadst not said for years—nay, start not! we of the temple know all—as it trembled, Krishn, when thou didst first learn it here, as thou art to-day, at my feet.'

In the silence that followed, Chris Davenant, who had so often ridden in a Hammersmith 'bus, was conscious of but two things in the wide world. That thrill to his finger-tips, and the scarlet stain of a woman's petticoat passing temple-wards beyond the arches; the only scrap of colour in the strange shadowless light which comes to India before the sun has risen over the level horizon.

So, once more, the Swâmi's voice came, still dignified, but with a trace of cunning in it now, of argument. 'Thou canst not do it unaided, Krishn; but with us behind thee—giving more freedom, remember, that the herd knows or dreams—thou couldst have thy wish—thou couldst teach the people.'

True. Chris, listening, saw this, even as he saw that scarlet streak; but all the while he was thinking idly that if Naraini were doomed to widowhood, the bridal scarlet would never be hers.

And yet he forgot even this when the Swâmi struck another string deftly. 'Our best disciples leave us'—the rhythm grew fateful, mournful.—'The new wisdom takes them soul and body ere they have learned to unhusk the old, and find its heart. But thou hast found it. Come back to us and teach us! For day by day the husk hides more. Even on the river, Krishn, where the old sanctuaries of the Godhead in Man and Woman stand side by side, the younger priests quarrel over Her power and His. As if the Man and the Woman were not, together, the Eternal Mind and Body! And the quarrel grows keen, like many another in those days; keener than ever since the golden paper fell, prophesying blood upon Her Altar. Lies, Krishn, lies! we know them so; but we are driven to them to keep our hold upon the people. What other hold have we but ignorance, if young wisdom leaves us?'

Chris gave a sort of inarticulate cry, and his hands rose passionately to his ears as if to shut out the words which were enlisting all things that were good in him on the side of something which he still condemned. But, as he stopped his ears despairingly, a sound came which no hand could quite shut out.

It was the clang of the temple bell, proclaiming that the Eucharist of Hindooism was ready for communicants; that the Water of Life which had touched the gods was waiting for those who thirsted for it.

Muffled, half heard, it seemed to vibrate afresh on every tense nerve of his mind and body. He stood up dazed, half hypnotised by it, by the figure—a dim shadow of a man that had risen also, smiling softly, among the dim arches.

'Come, my son,' it said, 'so far thou *art* with us! Let the rest be for a while. But this, stripped of its husk, is thine.—Come!'

And as it passed silently into the courtyard, Chris passed too, lost in the familiar unfamiliarity of all things. Of the clustering spikes of the temples seen against the primrose sky; of the drifting hint of incense shut in by the arcades; of the bare empty silence broken only by that clanging bell.

The scarlet streak was passing outwards, already sanctified, approved. Others would come, but for the moment there was solitude; save for that half-dozen of indifferent disciples droning over their devotions, and the officiating priest, unseen within the temple.

Unseen, because it was the Swâmi himself who, returning from the darkness of the sanctuary — into which he had passed swiftly, leaving Chris hesitating on the lowest step— stood on the upper one, the *Churrun-âmrit* in his hands, and bending low, said—

'Drink, Krishn Davenund! and live.'

The words came like a command, making the slender brown hands curve themselves into a cup.

How cool the holy water was on those hot palms! Dear God! How cool, how restful! The man's whole soul was in his lips as he stooped and drank thirstily.

A dream! a dream! but what a heavenly dream!

Chris stood there, in that shadowless light of dawn, unable even to realise what the dream was. And then, suddenly, a great desire to be alone, and yet to find companionship—a shrinking from the routine around him, and a longing to find shelter in the hidden heart of things—came to him as the worshippers, answering the call of the bell, began to crowd about the temple. So—the Swâmi having kept his promise of asking no more of him for the time—he passed out of the court into the bazaar beyond. But here the world was already chaffering over the needs of the body, and Chris, who was only conscious of his soul, stood bewildered in it, uncertain which way to go. Nothing seemed to claim him, not even his work; for it was Sunday morning.

And after that act of communion, the hope of companionship anywhere seemed, strangely enough, further from him than ever. So he stood idly watching the worshippers pass in and out of the arched entry to the temple court, leaving the world and coming back to it with businesslike faces, until he saw Râm Nâth approaching him, and the sight made him pull himself together swiftly.

'The very man I want!' said Râm Nâth in English, with such an elaborate lack of surprise at Chris's costume that the latter felt instantly that it was known, and had been discussed in Shark Lane. 'If you will wait a moment, I will walk—er—back with you.' The hesitancy showed that

something else was known also, and Chris felt a faint resentment come to lessen his forlornness as he waited while Râm Nâth disappeared towards the temple and reappeared again wiping his hands daintily with a hemstitched pocket-handkerchief.

'We of the world,' he explained as he tucked his arm English fashion into Chris Davenant's, 'have to keep in touch with the priests. You disagree, I know; but I hold you wrong. We are driven to acquiesce in much we think untrue in order to keep our hold on the masses. What other hold have we but their ignorance, if they deny our wisdom?'

The forlornness deepened again round poor Chris. Here was the Swâmi's argument upside down.

'What was it you wanted to see me about?' he asked resignedly, feeling that he could not go on with that subject.

'About this afternoon,' began Râm Nâth, and Chris stared blankly.

What! was it possible! his companion continued; had he forgotten that the afternoon was to see the realisation of their long-cherished project of founding an Anglo-Vernacular College? It came back to Chris then, and he hastened to deny what had really been the case; whereupon Râm Nâth went on, mollified. At the last moment, it seemed, some one had remembered that Lady Arbuthnot—who had kindly consented to lay the stone — ought to be presented with a bouquet; and Hâfiz Ahmad had claimed the honour for his wife, thereby raising so much jealousy in Shark Lane that he, Râm Nâth, thought the only solution of the difficulty was to intrust the giving to Mrs. Chris, as wife of the Vice-President of the Managing Committee (Chris heard himself so described with a sense of absolute bewilderment); only, of course, it might not, perhaps, be convenient now.

Chris came back to sudden perception of the other's meaning.

'She will be very glad,' he said quickly; 'I will tell her when I go home.'

It was done in a moment; but Chris felt his dream to be madder than ever as he realised that his afternoon's occupation would be standing in a frock-coat simpering, while Viva presented a bouquet. How prettily she would do it! How beautifully she would be dressed! Then in the evening? In the evening would the Swâmi come and ask for an answer?

Meanwhile, Râm Nâth was full of relief. That would settle the difficulty; really a most serious one, since nothing must mar the harmony of the memorable occasion. It would be singularly appropriate too, because, in order to ensure a large attendance, it had been arranged to hold an Extraordinary Chapter of the 'National Guild for Encouraging Comradeship,' to which most of the English officials and their wives belonged. In fact, it was to be a memorable occasion, and one that would fully justify our popular Lieutenant-Governor in, for the nonce, waving his rule against Sunday ceremonials in order to allow all employees to be present. Having here cut in on the lines of the speech he had prepared for the afternoon, Râm Nâth was fluency itself, and went on and on quite contentedly, while Chris, absorbed in that vision of himself in a frock-coat, listened without hearing. After all, which was the real Krishn Davenund, which the ideal? One was the older certainly; but change must come to all things.

They had reached the river steps by this time, and he paused—making Râm Nâth pause also—to look down on a scene which had not changed a hair-breadth in essentials for thousands of years. Yet Chris Davenant's eye noted one change of detail, in a moment, as a woman passed him on her way to fill her waterpot. There was a new sort of amulet on her wrist; an amulet made out of a brass cartridge casing. He glanced round quickly to see if other women were wearing it, and, by so doing, recognised rather a momentous fact; namely, that there were singularly few women to be seen, and that all who were, belonged to the working class.

He turned to Râm Nâth instantly and pointed out both signs, as to one who ought to know their value. 'What is up?' he said briefly. 'You must have seen these amulets being sold, as I did. Is it a trick? and who is doing it? and why?'

His companion shrugged his shoulders. 'The priests, I should say—it is on a par with the paper which fell from heaven. There is always something. You think we ought to protest; but why? Such manifestations of the temper of the masses strengthen the hands of the Opposition by engendering a fear of resistance in the Government, and so making for the considerate treatment at which we aim. It is not as if such trivialities could do harm.'

'They might—there is some hope of mischief behind them—there must be——'

'Mischief!' echoed Râm Nâth acutely; 'you know as well as I that there are many folk in Nushapore whose only hope lies in mischief, and here comes one of them.' He pointed to Burkut Ali, who, accompanied by a servant carrying a bundle of kites, was passing towards the bastion beyond the bridge. He was followed by other claimants to the 'Sovereignty of Air,' which was due to be decided that evening after the kites had been chosen and entered for the competition. Râm Nâth looked after the faded brocades contemptuously. 'Poor devils!' he said—as an Englishman might have said it—'one cannot help pitying them, and yet, between ourselves, if we were in power we couldn't do anything else with them; though, of course, as the Opposition, it does not do to say so! But to return to our argument. Believe me, the ignorant masses are helpless without a lead, and we, the educated party, will not give it towards anything unconstitutional.'

'But others might. Burkut Ali, for instance.'

'Burkut Ali? Not to-day, at any rate! He will be occupied in the Sovereignty of Air—really an appropriate employment, is it not?' replied Râm Nâth lightly. 'And as we—and all Nushapore which carries any weight—will be otherwise engaged also, this affair of amulets—even if there is anything in it—will be like the heaven-sent paper by to-morrow. I, at any rate, know of no reason why this should not be so,' he added a trifle resentfully, seeing the look on his companion's face, 'and if I don't, who should? Well! good-bye, if you are not coming on.'

Chris felt doubly relieved; partly at the almost unhoped-for straightforwardness of Râm Nâth's words, but mostly because he had been growing conscious during the conversation of the fact that, wherever he might find comradeship, it was not here. Still in that same weary bewilderment, therefore, he seated himself on the uppermost step and looked down to where, in the deep shadow of the archway of *Mai* Kâli's temple, he could just see—above the heads of a little crowd listening to a declaiming priest—a hint of the idol's red outstretched arms.

They brought back to him, in an instant, the sense of his own personal powerlessness. Gripped on either side by East and West, what could he do? In the afternoon a frock-coat! In the evening the Swâmi with his question! How should he, how *could* he answer it? How could he condemn Naraini

to a living death? How could he give up the past with its good and evil, the future with its evil and its good? Putting himself aside, for the truth's sake, what ought he to do? God! how powerless he was! *Mai* Kâli's widespread arms seemed to close on him, to choke him.

Till suddenly, a swift vitality came back to him, as a whistle—mellow as a blackbird's—made itself heard behind him. He turned with a smile, with a sense of relief, knowing it was Jân-Ali-shân.

It was. Jân-Ali-shân coming to feed the monkeys. Jân-Ali-shân looking marvellously spruce, alert, self-respecting, seeing that most of his night's rest had been on a brick stair!

'Mornin', sir!' he said, touching his cap decorously; but his hand lingered to hide a smile, as he added with deep concern, 'Ain't lost nothin' more o' your wardrobe to-day, sir, I hope?' Then his recollections got the better of his politeness, and the laugh came openly. 'Beg pardin, sir, I'm sure, but wen I think o' 'ole 'Oneyman and them pants —oh! Lordy Lord!'

The recollection, however, brought more than amusement to poor Chris, who, in truth, felt as if he had lost everything. It brought a sense of grateful comradeship, and there was quite a tremble in his voice, a mist in his eyes, as he said, 'It's all very well to laugh, but you saved my life that day, Ellison; you know you did. I've often thought of it since——'

The memory of kindness received was almost too much for him, he paused, unable to go on.

John Ellison looked the other way as he sat down at a respectful distance, and began to scatter sugar-drops to the monkeys. Then he cleared his throat elaborately.

'Like as you saved me, I expect, sir, from breaking my neck over them blamed stairs last night, sir. One good turn deserves another, as the sayin' is, so we're about quits. Not,' he went on, as if to make a diversion, 'that I was, so to speak, onnecessary drunk, sir, for it was a case o' gettin' tight or killin' a chap as cut me out, fair an' square, with my fancy. So, it bein' fair an' square, I chose the better part an' drowned my sor'rers in the flowin' bowl. It's surprisin',' he continued, with the affable defiance with which he always alluded to his own lapses from grace, 'wot a teeny drop o' whisky will

drown 'em; don't it, sir?' As he scattered the sugar-drops he sang the chorus of a drinking-song with great gusto.

They were an odd couple those two, the alien feeding the sacred monkeys, the native watching him silently, and both conscious of a bond of fellowship between them.

'I suppose so,' replied Chris, after such a lapse of time that the remark seemed almost irrelevant, 'but I never tried it. I'm a teetotaller.'

'Deary dear!' ejaculated Jân-Ali-shân sympathetically. It was really the only remark he could think of in such an extraordinary connection.

'It doesn't last, though, does it?' asked Chris after another long pause. 'And it gives you a headache next morning, doesn't it?'

Jân-Ali-shân's fluency returned to him. 'Lor' love you, no, sir! Not if you 's used to it; special if kind friends put you to by-bye proper.' He broke off, then turned to Chris and shook his head—'Now you, sir, if I may make so bold, looks as if you 'ad one. You takes things too dutiful, sir, I expec's. It 's 'ard on the 'ead, sir, is duty.'

Even *so* much sympathy drove Chris to hiding the mist in his eyes by watching the monkeys. They were jostling and hustling, as ever, over the prize; but the sight for a wonder had brought few spectators, and such as they were stood far off, more curious than amused.

Jân-Ali-shân, looking towards them, raised his eyebrows and nodded carelessly. 'Got the 'ump to-day, 'as you, Ramsammy? Well, keep it, sonny! It don't make no odds to me or 'Oneyman. Do it, siree?'

Apparently none, for the hoary old sinner, out and away the tamest there, was pouching sugar-drops as fast as he could from the loafer's hand.

'Ellison,' came Chris Davenant's voice at last, with a note of decision in it, 'what would you do if you found yourself in—in such a tight place that you couldn't—yes, that you couldn't possibly get out of it?'

'Do?' echoed the other slowly, as he shook out the crumbs and tore the paper into fragments. 'W'y, kill the chap as put me there, if it was John Ellison 'imself as done the job! That 's what I 'd do, sir.'

Chris rose, and the note of decision was stronger. 'Thanks,' he said briefly, 'I think you 're right.'

But Jân-Ali-shân had risen also, and now stood facing his superior officer with an expression of kindly tolerance and mournful respect.

'Not, sir, as there ever is sich an almighty tight place, as a chap can't get out of by leavin' a h'arm or a leg or a bit of hisself generally to be cast into 'ell fire, as it say in 'Oly Writ; for there ain't nothin' impossible, if you've enough of the devil in you—that's 'ow it comes in, sir'; here he paused, doubtful, perhaps, whether Holy Writ contained this also, then went on easily, 'for it ain't no manner of use, sir, reachin' round for things as you can't catch no real holt of—you must jes' take wot comes 'andy, though it mayn't be much to be proud of—such as cuss words an' kicks and that like. But they give a powerful grip sometimes, sir, as you'd find, savin' your presence, if you was to give 'em a fair try.' He paused again, looked at Chris tentatively, then smiled a perfectly seraphic smile full of pity, wisdom, almost of tenderness. 'If I might make so bold, sir, w'ot a man you an' me'd make if we was mixed up! H'arch-h'angels wouldn't 'ave a look in! And w'ot's more, I shouldn't 'ave to clean damn myself keepin' them *Kusseye* coolies from sneakin' the cold chisels; an' a good name too for the lot, though it is cuss-you as I make it in general.'

'*Kuzai?*' echoed Chris quickly. 'What! are those fellows from the butcher's quarter giving trouble—and I only put them on out of charity? Why didn't you tell me before?'

But Jân-Ali-shân had reverted to his affable indifference. 'Trouble,' he echoed in his turn, 'Lord, no, sir! I has to read the Riot Act summary most days—they get quarrelling with the 'Indoos over some cow-killin' tommy-rot; but w'en it come to sneakin' cold chisels, I 'ad to knock 'arf a dozen o' 'em down. But they don't give no trouble to speak of. Nor won't,' he added significantly, 'if they're spoke to proper.'

'I'll see to it to-morrow,' said Chris, and then, once more, wondered at his own words. This afternoon a frock-coat; to-morrow an inquiry into a workmen's quarrel; and between the two, inevitably, that decision. The rest was all unreal, but that was certain, that must come.

Jân-Ali-shân, however, as—after touching his cap decorously—he moved away, sang

'To-morrow will be Monday'

as if all the foundations of his world were absolutely sure.

And there were others, besides these two, on the river steps that morning whose outlook on the future showed the same divergence. A couple of municipal scavengers, armed with the broom and basket which under our rule bids defiance to privilege, prejudice, and privacy, talked with cheerful certainty as they swept up the paper Jân-Ali-shân had torn to bits. The *Sirkar* would have to employ everybody's relations if the plague went on as it had begun. They were shutting the shops already in the butcher's quarter, the hospitals were full, the bazaars empty. Of a surety there was a good time coming for scavengers!

Two women, however, returning with their waterpots from listening at the temple, agreed that if, as the priest said, *Mai* Kâli had declared there must be blood on her altars ere the plague was stayed, what was the use of amulets? Besides, who could tell if the promise was not a trick; who, briefly, could tell anything except that it was an ill time for virtuous women, and that those were lucky who could stay at home? So with furtive glances, and keeping close together, they shuffled back to some dim alley, to retail what they had heard.

CHAPTER XXI

RED PAINT

OVER on the other side of the city, however, on the wide stretch of sandy waste behind an outlying dispensary which had been turned into a segregation camp, the advocates of certainty and uncertainty had changed places. Here, in the little grass-screened yard, six feet square, which Jack Raymond's kindliness had secured for the ordinary reed hut to which poor crushed old Auntie Khôjee had been brought, it was a scavenger who doubted, a woman who—even amid tears—had faith.

'Lo! brother,' said Khôjee in gentle reproof, as she sat on the string bed hiding her grief-blurred face discreetly from the tottering old man who had been sent in to sweep out the premises; an old man bowed, palsied, senile, yet still, as a male creature, claiming that calm perfunctory drawing of a veil an inch or two more over a withered cheek, 'thou shouldst not repeat such tales; they do harm. As I have told thee before, God knows what happened was not the fault of the *Huzoors*. It was Jehân's, and mine, and Lateef's; if indeed it was ought but God's will. And lies will not bring her back again! It was lies that killed her, Noormahal, Light of Palaces!'—a sob choked the quavering voice, but she struggled on truthfully—'and the *Huzoors* were kind in concealing what they could. What use to drag the honour of the King's House in the dust? Even Jehân saw that and held his peace. It is ye—ye of the basket and broom—strangers—not of the house knowing the honour of the house as in old time—who have done ill in talking. And of the girl too. Lo! what thou sayest of her and the pearls may be true; but I know naught of it, and Jehân hath lied ever. Then for the bracelets! Have I not worn one and cried for death? But death has not come, as thou sayest it comes; though I have worn *this* these two days.'

She held out her thin arm as she spoke, in order to show the *râm rucki* which Jack Raymond, in his efforts to reassure her, had fastened round her wrist.

The old man ceased sweeping to peer at it, then chuckled wheezily. 'Oho! Oho! *bibi!* and wherefore not, since that is a *râm rucki* which all know of old! But this other I speak of is new. I tell thee it hath the death-mark on it, and the arrow-head which claims all for the *Sirkar's* use. Its like none have ever seen before. They sold it deceitfully as safeguard yesterday at Sheik Chilli's fair, and men bought it for their wives and children—*Alal* the tyranny of it, the cleverness! who can stand against their ways? So now it is proved a sign of death indeed; all who wear it, all who *have* worn it, are in the *Huzoor's* power. When they are wanted, they will die.'

Despite her disbelief—a disbelief founded largely on her own kindly grateful heart—Aunt Khôjee felt a cold creep in her old bones. 'How canst tell by now? Some may escape,' she quavered.

The old scavenger waggled his head wisely. 'This I know, *bibi*, that in the *Kuteeks'* and *Lohars'* houses—yea! and in others too where the sickness was rife, for, see you, it hath been in the city this fortnight past, though folk held their tongues—all bought these bracelets for safety. All! and it is from these very houses that the dead come! Am I not *Dom* by craft, though I grow too old and crooked to straighten even dead limbs? Have I not seen? I tell thee, *bibi*, not one of the corpses taken out of the city this morning but had the bracelet on its wrist! Ay! and not one of those carried by force to the *hospital* but had it too!'

It was an absolutely true statement, even if capable of a more natural explanation.

'But *Rahmân-sahib*, the bracelet-brother, did not give them bracelets?' protested Aunt Khôjee, falling back fearfully on what still seemed incredible.

'God knows,' mumbled the superannuated streaker of dead things. 'Mayhap he did not sell them, but it was by order. A Hindoo in the city, Govind by name, hath a paper with the order written on it, and signed by the *Lat-sahib* and *Victoria-Queen*. So there is no lie there, *bibi!*'

He passed out resentfully, driving the refuse he had swept

up, into the world beyond the six-feet-square yard, with a last flourish of his broom.

Khôjee, left forlorn, sat looking at her *râm rucki* doubtfully. Could the tale be true? Could the *Huzoors* have been capable of such a devilish treachery? Even so, he, *Rahmân-sahib*, had not been so. His bracelet had brought safety. Even after two days, Auntie Khôjee recognised this. The *daghdar-sahib* had laughed at her fear of plague; they had given her seclusion of the strictest; a Musulman woman, who had called her 'my princess,' had brought her better food than she had had for years, and even Lateef had been allowed to come during the day and talk to her. Last, not least, the *daghdar* himself had respected her veil, and sent a *miss-sahiba* instead—a miss in a curious dress, who had let her cry about Noormahal, and comforted her with cardamoms—real cardamoms. It had almost been a visit of condolence! Then she was told that in eight days she might go back—though not to the wide dreary house, since it had already been utilised as a hospital. But *Rahmân-sahib* had promised to settle that from the rent of this, Jehân should pay for a more suitable lodging, and also allow her a proper pension.

A bracelet-brother indeed! Yet lying tongues traduced him and she, a bracelet-sister, could do nothing but listen to them! She wept softly over her own ingratitude, so that Lateefa, finding her thus engaged, attempted consolation on the old, old lines which belong to all faiths, all people, by saying that it was God's will, that Noormahal was taken from the evil to come, that she was at peace; until, finding his comfort unavailing, and being pressed for time, he told the old lady gently that she must not expect any more of his companionship that day, since, the term of his more rigorous segregation being over he was free to go out, provided he returned by sundown.

Then to his surprise she suddenly ceased her curious whimpering wail, and looked up at him swiftly.

'Thou canst go out! Then thou shalt go to *him* and tell him of the lies! Yea! and tell him that I, Khôjeeya Khânum, wear his gift, and—and will never forget him, and his beauty, and his kindness!'

'Tell *him*?' echoed the kite-maker, wondering if he stood on his head or his heels when he was asked to take so fervent a message to a man, from so discreet a lady as Aunt

Khôjee. It did not take long, however, to make him understand; for the old scavenger had swept out the men's quarters also. But, to the dear old lady's disgust, he was inclined to laugh at, and be sceptical over, both her indignation and that of those who had bought the amulet. The tale was not likely to be true. Why should the *Huzoors* go such a roundabout way to work when they had soldiers and guns? To be sure, these were few in Nushapore at the present moment, and folk were saying that the talk about Sobrai and Noormahal and Dilarâm—God curse the low-born pryers who know not how to keep silence for decency's sake!—had set the *pultan* (native regiment), which was a high-class Mohammedan one, by the ears; but there were plenty of *rigiments* close by. And, if it *was* true, what good would a message to *Rahmân-sahib* do? It would only make him angry. And if the tale were a lie, what would he care? Did the *Huzoors* ever care what folk said? Never! That was why they ruled the land.

But Aunt Khôjee was firm; even when Lateef—who had told her everything—protested that he had no time to lose; that if he was to have any chance of getting at the ring, which, he trusted, was still concealed among the kites, it must be before their selection for the flying match. Since, once they were chosen, none might touch them till the 'Sovereignty of Air' was decided. Even now he might be too late for the courtyard, and have to go to the turret, ready to seize his chance during the trials. And what is more—here he gave a glance at the sky—if he knew aught of kite-flying, those with fair ballast would surely be chosen to-day; and therefore, of course, the one which had the ring hidden in the guise of a bit of brick within a little calico bag!

'Then it is safe so far. It will be guarded till evening, and then thou canst see to it,' asserted Aunt Khôjee autocratically.

'Not till after sundown, mayhap, and I must return then; and who can tell what may happen if it is left longer,' persisted Lateef.

'Let what may happen! The *daghdars* will not kill thee—they are kind; and what is the ring, now, but empty honour, since there is no heir? But the other is different. *Rahmân-sahib* is bracelet-brother. He hath been kind—we owe him

this. Wouldst thou be even as Jehân, Lateef, willing to steal honour from any?' Never in her long life had Aunt Khôjee been so obstinate.

'I care not, so Jehân doth not steal the ring,' muttered Lateef revengefully. 'Nay, sister, I will not go!'

She bent towards him and laid a wistful hand on his. 'But if God give him back honour, Lateef, should we hinder it?—we who have sinned also? Not so, brother! Let Him decide; and for the rest, help *me*. Lo! for all her years, this is the first bond between Khôjeeya Khânum, King's Daughter, and a man. Let her keep it faithful, unstained.'

Lateef gave an odd sound, some part of it being his thin musical laugh. 'Sure, sister, thou wouldst make a saint even of a kite-flyer!' he said lightly. 'So be it! I will go by way of the courtyard. Then if the kites be gone already —as I misdoubt me—I will to *Rahmân-sahib*'s with thy message; so to the turret—or wait till evening as thou sayest. 'Tis a chance either way; and mayhap, if I give God His will with Lateef whom He made, He may give Lateef his will with the kites he made! That is but fair, sister.'

'Yea, brother,' assented Khôjeeya piously, not in the least understanding what he said. 'So it will come to pass, surely, since He is just.'

Thus it happened, an hour or two after this, when Grace Arbuthnot was once more standing beside her husband's office table, as she had stood a few weeks before with the telegram which withdrew the confidential plan of campaign in her hand, that a card was brought in to Sir George by the orderly. He put it on the table with a frown, ere looking at his wife again, and finishing his remark—

'Tear it up, my dear, and throw it into the waste-paper basket! Why should you worry about the thing? I only showed it to you to amuse you, and because it was a good example of the lies the natives will tell, the threats they will use—on occasion.'

Lady Arbuthnot, who was once more holding a paper in her hand, looked up from it. Her face was pale.

'I think you ought to inquire, George, I really do. If there is anything——'

'My dear child!' interrupted her husband impatiently, 'what can there be? Didn't I burn the thing with my own

hands? You mustn't get nervous, Grace; I've noticed you have been so ever since—well! for some little time past. And, of course, all that about the pearls, and the loathsome imbroglio regarding them, *is* annoying. I should like to kick Lucanaster and Jehân Aziz and the lot! Anything more unfortunate at this juncture can scarcely be imagined; but there is nothing to worry about.' He laid his hand on her shoulder as he rose to touch the hand-bell. 'And now, my dear,' he added, 'I have to see Mr. Raymond—he has written "important" on his card.'

'Mr. Raymond!' echoed Grace, her face flushing, then growing pale again. 'Oh, George!' she paused for a moment, then spoke more calmly—'George! I want you to do something for me. I want you to consult Mr. Raymond about —about this matter—will you?'

Sir George stood rather stiff, and the placidly obstinate look came to his mouth. 'Mr. Raymond?' he echoed in his turn. 'Why on earth should Mr. Raymond know anything about it—unless you have been speaking to him?'

She had realised her slip before the suggestion came, a suggestion whose truth she was too proud to deny, even though her husband's displeasure at the thought was unmistakable. 'I *have* spoken to him,' she replied steadily. 'I told him your opinion as to the danger should the hints in the native press prove to have any foundation; and he quite agreed.'

'I feel flattered,' remarked Sir George coldly, as he sat down again. 'Perhaps, my dear, when you are ready to go, you will ring the bell. Mr. Raymond may be in a hurry.'

Grace Arbuthnot's heart sank within her. A woman—especially a sensible woman—can hardly live for ten years in close and affectionate companionship with a man without having seen him at his best and his worst; and that the latter was the case with Sir George now his wife recognised instantly; albeit with a clear comprehension of the cause, which made her feel a pathetic regret that *she* should thus handicap a man, as a rule so just, so unbiassed. And that, too, at a moment when much might depend on his being free from personal feeling; since Jack Raymond, she knew, would not have come lightly. Some woman might have fought against facts. Grace was too wise for that. She simply rang the bell, and passed into her own sitting-room with

that pathetic regret. It seemed so pitiful after these long years to find antagonism in these two men; and yet what right had she to feel scornful? Was it not bitterly true that she herself could not forget?—not quite!

Seated at her writing-table, her head on her hand, she tried to argue the matter out with herself, and failed. Only this seemed clear. That once you admitted certain emotions to be inevitable, it was very hard to set limits to them. Surely, therefore, there must be a firmer basis than the conventional one; but what was it?

She roused herself, after a time, to the consideration that no matter how the state of tension between herself, her husband, and Jack Raymond came about—and that such a tension did exist, she was again too proud to deny—it must not be allowed to interfere with matters more important; and that it might do so was only too palpable; all the more so because those two, especially her husband, would be loth to admit the very existence of such a possibility.

Therefore, she herself must see and talk to Mr. Raymond. Nay, more! she must get him to do what her husband would not do: make inquiries concerning this threat of publishing some documents if payment for it was not made, which was contained in the letter which—half unconsciously—she had brought away with her in her hand from the office.

She passed out into the anteroom, told the attendant orderly that Raymond *sahib*, on leaving Sir George, was not to be shown out as usual by the office entry, but through the suite of reception-rooms, and then went thither herself to await and waylay him.

Being seldom used in the morning, these rooms leading the one from the other into a hall beyond, and so to the grand portico, were dim and silent, the jalousies closed, the great *jardinières*, full of flowers, mysteriously sweet in the shadowy corners. And Grace herself, ready for church save for the bunch of flowers and lace that go to make up the headgear of a *grande toilette*, looked mysteriously sweet also in the curves of a cushioned chair. She suited the vista of rooms, so empty of trivial nicknacks, so restful in its perfect blending of comfort and beauty. Comfort, not luxury; beauty, not decoration. Cold in its marble floors, warm in its oriental embroideries, and, above all things, charming in both its scented chilliness and scented warmth.

Perhaps she knew that she suited it, and that it suited her, since the hope of this decides the disposition of furniture in most drawing-rooms. Perhaps, in a way, she calculated on this, also on the effect of memory, in reducing Jack Raymond to obedience, since it was in these very rooms, scarcely different even in detail, that the most part of those two happy years had been spent. Such unconscious calculations are quite inevitable when women hold, as they are taught to hold as sacred, the dogma that true womanhood should never permit manhood to forget that it is woman.

She certainly succeeded in this instance, and her words—'Oh! Mr. Raymond, I am so glad. I want to speak to you so much'—brought the latter back into the past with a vengeance, as, inwardly cursing himself for having taken the trouble to come and warn Sir George of something he thought serious, he mechanically followed the orderly's lead.

She scarcely looked a day older; she certainly was more beautiful. And surely, the last time he had seen her in those rooms alone, there had been just such a scarlet hand of poinsettia against the cold marble above her head.

'You have been seeing my husband,' she began quite unconsciously, and he broke in on the remark with a curious little laugh.

'I have, Lady Arbuthnot; and I fear I have wasted my time; and his. The former is of little consequence, but the latter I regret.'

As she so often did, out of a blessed unconsciousness that her mental position towards him was quite untenable, she appealed at once to that past confidence.

'Don't be angry, please! I was afraid there might be—difficulties. Sir George,' she smiled frankly, 'was in a very bad temper. I had just'—she broke off, realising that absolute confidence was impossible, then went on—'but you must not let that interfere with—with what you think advisable. And you do think with me, don't you? that it would be advisable to inquire whether—whether that unfortunate letter of mine——'

Jack Raymond, who had remained standing in impatient hesitation between his politeness and his desire to escape as soon as possible, stared at her.

'What letter?' he asked.

She rose too in sudden surprise, and they stood facing each

other against that background of white marble and scarlet outspread poinsettia. 'Then it was something else,' she said; 'I thought it must be *this*.'

He took the letter she held out, and read it.

'It says nothing definitely,' she went on, 'but—but I think it must be that; don't you? If so, what ought we to do?'

The 'we' struck him sharply, and he asked, 'Have you told Sir George?'

'Told him?' she echoed, flushing a little. 'No! I wish, now, I had, at first; he—he would have faced the possible danger by this time. But now? now it is impossible, Mr. Raymond! I have thought it out thoroughly. It would be better to take the risk, if that is necessary. But it need not be, if you will help me.'

He shook his head.

'Why should you not?' Her head was up, her beautiful face full of a faint scorn, her clear eyes were on his unflinchingly.

He met her look, as he always met a challenge, with almost brutal sincerity.

'Because I do not choose to—to stultify the last ten years; because I gave up all that sort of thing when—when I said good-bye to you—here.'

'And you would let that stand between you and—no! not between you—but between death and life perhaps for others; between order and disorder, anyhow. You think it important, I know——'

'Sir George does not,' he interrupted.

'What does that matter? You are as capable of judging as he; perhaps more so! Why should you be a coward? Why should you, who possibly—no! probably—know far more of the ins and outs of the city than the regular officials? —Oh, don't deny it! Have I not heard them say, "Ask Raymond" this or that, and "Raymond will know," and have I not been glad—so glad that everything has not been spoilt! Why should you, I say, give up your own opinion? For it comes to that. What you came here to tell Sir George to-day, for instance; you must have thought it important, or you would not have come.'

'I came because I thought it my duty to acquaint the authorities with certain facts that had been brought to my notice. I have done so, and that ends it——'

'It does not end it! You and Sir George disagreed, you know you did, as to its importance. You still think you are right, and yet you yield to him—why?'

There was a moment's pause, and then Jack Raymond gave a hard laugh. 'Why? I will tell you the truth, Lady Arbuthnot, though you may not like it—though I acknowledge it is humiliating—for all of us! Because I have had to yield to him before. Because he hasn't forgotten, and I haven't forgotten, and you haven't forgotten—not quite, have you? It is nothing to be ashamed of; it is only natural—one of the limitations of life—but there it is, isn't it?'

He took a step nearer in the silence.

'Isn't it?' he repeated. 'Tell the truth, Grace, and shame—don't let us say the devil—but fate. There, put your hand in mine, and face our own—forgetfulness!'

She faced it boldly, even though he felt her hand tremble in his. 'Did I ever deny it?' she said softly, with tears in her voice; 'I do not, I *cannot* forget quite. It is pitiful, of course; but why——?'

'Don't!' he interrupted quickly. 'Don't, my dear lady! You will only make me remember more; that is the truth. As you say, it is pitiful; but there it is.'

She stood looking at him with a world of regret, some anger, and a little, a very little scorn.

'And you will let this interfere with—with everything.'

'Not with everything, but with this, certainly,' he pointed to the letter which he had laid on the *console* below the poinsettias. 'And that is all the easier to do, because I don't believe in it—quite. But if I were you, I should tell Sir George the truth and let him decide. As for the other matter about which I came to speak, he may be right, and I wrong. Time will show.'

'It may, disastrously, to many—to India—even to Empire!'—the scorn came uppermost now.

'Surely,' he replied, reverting to his usual manner, 'the Empire can take care of itself. If not, Lady Arbuthnot, I am afraid it must do without my help—in Nushapore. Good-bye.'

The qualification held all his previous arguments in it, and re-aroused his own bitterness at his own memories, so that as he walked on down the long vista of rooms, he felt each well-remembered bit of it to be a fresh injury; and his impatience,

his obstinacy grew at each step. Why had not Grace the sense to believe, once for all, as he had told her at the very first, that hers was not the hand to wile his back to the plough?

Her hand! Ye Gods! And he could feel its touch now on his. That woman's touch so full of possibilities, so full of power.

'Mr. Waymond! Oh, Mr. Waymond! Do please don't go away!' came Jerry's voice from a side-room used as a schoolroom which opened out from the hall. 'Oh, please do come and help me wif this. I'm 'fwaid I don't know somefing I ought to know.'

It never needed much of Jerry's voice to cajole any one; so the next moment, temper or no temper, Jack Raymond was bending over the little figure which, perched on a high chair at the table, was busy over a map of India.

'Hullo, young man!' he said. 'Lessons?'

Jerry looked at him in shocked surprise. 'Why, it's Sunday! And I've learned my hymn—'bout babes an' sucklings an' such is the kingdom of heaven, don't you know. An' I'm not 'llowed to go to church 'cos mum says I'm not normal yet; don't you fink, Mr. Waymond, it's just orful dull of people always twying to be just the same? I like it when mum says I'm feverish. I dweam dweams. Las' night I dweamt there was a weal wow, an' dad made me his galloper, an' I had secwet dispatches. Oh! it was just wippin', I tell you. I think secwet dispatches is—is the loveliest game! 'Cos it's—it's all your own, you know, and nobody, nobody else mustn't have them, or know, not even mum. And you keep 'em quite, quite secwet, an' you don't even know what's inside, yourself; do you? Not if you play it ever, ever so long as I do. And I *did* it once too, you know, weally; at least I fink I did, though they say I didn't.'

The child's eyes were still over bright, his cheeks flushed with the last touches of the sun fever which comes and goes so easily with English children in India; and Jack Raymond smiled softly at the little lad who reminded him so much of his own boyhood, even though the remembrance, at that particular moment, brought a fresh bitterness towards the woman he had just left—the woman who would have liked, as it were, to eat her cake and have it.

'And what are you up to now?' he asked, seating himself

on the table and looking down at what lay on it—the outspread map, a paint-box, and a crimson-stained tumbler of water—'spoiling the map of India; eh?'

'I ain't *spoiling* it,' retorted Jerry indignantly, 'I'm only paintin' it wedder. Mum said I might.'

'I'll tell you what, though, young man! You'll spoil yourself if you suck your paint-brush.'

It came out of Jerry's mouth with the usual crimson flag of contrition all over his cheeks. 'It's orful hard to wemember when one is finking—finking of nothin' but the wed, and yet twyin' to play fair.'

'Play fair?' echoed Jack Raymond. 'What game are you playing now, Jerry?'

'Oh! it isn't a game; it's weal. Only, I mean the tiddly little bits'—Jerry, his tongue in his cheek, was laboriously at work again on Rajputana with a brush so surcharged with carmine that it left perfect bloodstains on the general tint of pale yellow—'I don't want, in course, to take more 'n belongs to the Queen, but they mustn't have the teeniest bit of what belongs to us, must they, Mr. Waymond?'

'I see,' replied the man slowly. 'You are painting the town red for Her Majesty—I mean the map.—Isn't it red enough as it is, Jerry?'

The child in his excitement put down his paint-brush in the middle of Bengal as a safe spot. 'Not half wed enough! An' besides! there's mistakes an' mistakes, an' the yellow an' gween run over the line. I don't mind the yellow so much, 'cos we only *allow* them to be that colour; but it's dweadful with gween! An' then there's some orful fings. You see that spot'—he pointed triumphantly to an almost invisible speck of red like a midge bite—'I made that! It wasn't there. Mum said the map people fought it was too small to put in, but it's got to be, you see; so when I give the map to Budlu—Budlu's got a little grandson older nor me at school who learns maps, and mum said I might give him this one—I'll tell him it isn't *quite* the wight size. But it may be, some time, you know. Perhaps when I gwow up it will be.' The clear bright eyes grew dreamy, as Jerry, with conscientious care, skirted around the possessions of an extremely minor chieftain.

'Perhaps!' echoed the man still more slowly. 'And I expect you 'd like to make it bigger, wouldn't you?'

'Wather! I should think I just would! Like as mum says her gweat-gweat-gwandfather-people—an' yours too, she said, Mr. Waymond—did. Just like Clive, you know, an' all the people that people wemember.'

The man's face was very close to the child's now, as resting his elbows on the table, he watched the crimson brush.

'What a Jingo you are, Jerry! And if any one were to try—to try and make a really red bit yellow, for instance—or even pale pink—what would you do?'

Jerry went on with his task laboriously. 'I wouldn't let 'em, in course. I'd take away their tumblers, an' their paint-brushes, an' everything, till they hadn't no excuse; an' then, if they was bad still, I'd whack 'em!'

Jack Raymond rose to go. 'A very sound theory of Government, young man,' he said, and his voice had an odd ring in it, 'especially the whacking. It's a pity you're not grown-up now, Jerry—why aren't you?'

Jerry looked up with the child's sudden consciousness of a joke, and smiled at his friend roguishly.

'Why? 'Cos *you* are, in course! When you're dead, I'll do it. It's your turn now! Oh don't go, please! you haven't told me yet——'

'What?' asked Jack Raymond, pausing with a still odder look on his face.

Jerry's finger travelled carefully down to Pondicherry. 'That!' he said. 'They say it is Fwench, an' it's beastly; but when I looked in the atlas for Fwance colour, it was all sorts—gweens, and blues, and yellows, and weds, all mixed up. So, please! wouldn't it be fair to make it wed too? I couldn't help what it *looks like*, could I, if I didn't *mean* cheating?'

'My dear little chap!' replied Jack Raymond, 'if I were you, I'd paint every blessed bit of it bright scarlet!' And then suddenly, much to Jerry's surprise, he stooped and kissed the child's puzzled yet open forehead.

'Oh! fank you,' said Jerry politely. 'Mum kisses me like that sometimes, and dad too. I—I like it.'

CHAPTER XXII

THE BETTER PART

WHEN Jack Raymond left Jerry painting the map red, he was in that curiously ill-used frame of mind which comes to most of us, when a good action—which we have steadily refused to do—becomes imperative, and ceases therefore to have any virtue save the virtue of necessity; when, briefly, we have neither eaten our cake nor have it. He knew perfectly well that sooner or later that day—the later the better to his ill-humour—he would go down to the city, make inquiries concerning that letter, pay for its possession—here the remembrance of those bank-notes, ready for use even on a Sunday, in his pocket-book, came to make him swear inwardly at a coincidence that was too much like fate for freedom—if needful, and then send it to Lady Arbuthnot, he supposed, with a polite little note!

And all because a boy who reminded him of his own boyhood, had made him feel that no other course was open to him—that he was bound to do this thing—or shoot himself for not doing it!

The church-bells had just finished chiming as, on his way to the club, he walked down the Mall; for the main entrance to Government House gave on it, and not on the Garden Mound. In his present evil temper even this triviality annoyed him. Why, in heaven's name, could not Lady Arbuthnot have let him go as he had come? go back to his own life?—to the philosophic peace which had been so pleasant! And now——

What cursed nonsense it was for him to put himself within the reach of disturbing elements!—for they were disturbing. If it could even be of any real use to her—here something in his own thought of her, so beautiful, so good, made him realise his position in regard to her still more clearly. No!

despite his respect, and her goodness, it would not take much to make him passionately in love with her again. And would she——?

That was another question; but she had not forgotten!

As he told himself this, she and Lesley Drummond came by in the Government House carriage, and he paused to let it turn in to the church compound.

'We are dreadfully late, I'm afraid,' called the former concernedly. 'Are you coming?'

Was he coming? And she could fret herself over being two minutes late! Good women were really quite incomprehensible, especially in India, where they did so little to deserve the name. The hundred or so, for instance, in church at that present moment—did they do an atom more—no! not half so much as he did—for the good of the world around them, or the Empire—except perhaps in supplying it with sons! Yet there they would be, quite satisfied with themselves. The thought attracted him. He was in no hurry himself to do the thing he knew he must do—in fact, any delay was welcome—so he turned into the church compound also, and stood decorously at the door till the Absolution, which was being given, was over, before slipping into the nearest seat, next to a very stout old lady whose only claim to be considered even a Eurasian was her bonnet. But as he had stood for those brief moments looking over the heads of the bowed congregation, he had noticed, with a sense of the humour of the thing, that the percentage of dark blood in the worshippers could be very fairly gauged by their distance from the white robes of the choir boys! The good lady beside him, however, ended the scale of colour, for the native Christian, *pur et simple*, was, of course, absorbed by the Mission churches.

And the non-Christian native? There was no sign of him either. No sound of him, no thought even of him from beginning to end! Jack Raymond stood up decorously, and sat down decorously, knelt decorously, and listened decorously, with a sense of unreality, a sense of dislocation from his surroundings, that was not much less keen than Chris Davenant's had been when he listened to the 'Society for the General Good of Peoples' at Hâfiz Ahmad's house. The sermon—a good one in its way—might have been preached in a London suburb, save for this, that beyond a little

perfunctory solacing of Eurasian paupers, there was none of the active attempt to carry words into deeds which would have existed in the listeners of a suburban congregation. Absolutely, utterly, none. Not one woman there knew as much as he, the idler, of the hard poverty-stricken lives of the people. Yet these very women, when they went home, would feel themselves accursed as worldlings if they did not district-visit or join the Charity Organisation!

These considerations did not improve one listener's temper. On the contrary, they increased his desire for delay; for, having already warned Sir George that, in his opinion, the city was more unstable than authority seemed to think, he washed his hands of that responsibility. All he had to do, therefore, was to get and pay for this paper, if needful, and so prevent its being made use of against the Government—prevent its being a worry to—to Jerry's mother!

He therefore had lunch and a cigar quietly. It was, in fact, close on four o'clock when he started, riding, for the city. But at the nearest gate to the bazaar, whence the threat of using the information had emanated, he gave his pony to the *sais*, bidding him go home; since he knew by experience the attention which a European on horseback excites in a native town, and without in the least wishing for concealment, he had no desire to be followed by gossip-mongers. The gate in question was that giving on the poor Hindoo quarter, the glass-bangle makers, the poultry keepers, the burden carriers, and—in a sort of off-shoot half-in, half-out of the city—the leather workers; that curious class, apart from all caste and creed, yet necessary to all, and from their ignorance, their isolation, the most difficult to civilise.

So far Jack Raymond, personally, had seen and heard nothing beyond Aunt Khôjee's tale, as reported by Lateefa, to give grounds for more than caution; but he had not gone a dozen yards down the miserable bazaar which served the neighbourhood, before he realised that action might be necessary. Most of the shops were shut, and scarcely a human being was to be seen; signs—in upside-down Eastern fashion—that the peace of the people was disturbed. And it might mean more. These signs, to be seen of all, might have been duly reported to the proper authorities and been disregarded by them. But if they had not been so reported, there could, considering the perfection of organisation for

such reports which exists in every native town, be but one explanation of the fact — treachery! He would find out about this, he told himself, merely for his own satisfaction, on his way back, since the minor treachery of police constables and such like had its price, and he had five thousand rupees in his pocket towards a good deed! It would be curious if, after all——

The thought of Lesley made him smile good-humouredly. What with the *râm rucki* and the green sleeves, and now this possible good deed, it was hopeless to escape that young person. He walked on more cheerfully, and in a few minutes found himself in the courtyard of Dilarâm's house on his way to Govind's den on the second story; since his—as yet unknown—quarry had given that address. The whole house, however, was so still, so deserted, that he half feared his journey might be in vain. But it was not so. The door, marked 24 in rough white letterings, was ajar, and Govind, yawning, dishevelled, rose from a corner with an apology of a *salaam* as his visitor entered. The room was almost empty. Even the printing-press had disappeared, gone, like all else, in the attempt to live upon lies; for, even with Govind's nose for nastiness, he had been driven to sell the goodwill, stock, and block of the '*Ear of the Wise*' to another unwise aspirant towards literary fame. His last issue had been the one detailing the horrors of Sobrai's disgrace and Noormahal's death; to the unusual success of which, especially among the Mohammedan soldiers in cantonments, had been due the unexpected offer to buy the going concern. The would-be purchaser being a new discontent, who, having been turned out of a regimental office for falsifying returns, was keen on revenging himself by spreading disaffection in the native army. Govind had naturally jumped at the offer, and for two days past had been debauching himself on the proceeds, in certain anticipation of more money to come from the sale of something which could no longer be used as copy; for, he told himself, even if his first bold bid for a buyer produced no results, almost every native newspaper in Nushapore would be glad of anything which might help to damage—when the proper time came—the good faith of their rulers.

But now, as the figure of a *sahib* showed at the door, his *bhang*-dulled eyes lit up with triumph; the next moment, however, he was murmuring a humble '*Gharib-nawâz!*' and

wishing that the earth would open and swallow him—wishing he had never sent the letter! But who could have dreamt of its being answered by *Rahmân-sahib!*

'Oh! it is you, is it?' remarked Jack Raymond, recognising an old club *baboo* whom he had run in for theft of cigars. 'You are Govind Râm, editor, are you? That simplifies matters. I suppose you wrote this, and that the talk of knowing a man who knows, etc., is the usual business. You have a paper—you want five thousand rupees for it—just like your cheek! You'll get two. Hand it over.'

He made the offer advisedly; for he knew the man to have friends in the Secretariat; knew, briefly, that he was a likely man to have got hold—if not of the lost letter, yet of something confidential. To haggle with him, therefore, was mere waste of time; more especially as he himself had long since ceased to regard the five thousand rupees he carried about with him as his own money. So it might as well go—in a good action!—and save him bother.

It did. Govind, who at most had expected five hundred, lost no time in producing the paper.

Jack Raymond looked at it, then at Govind.

'You d——d fool,' he said softly, 'I don't think you'll find it worth while.'

Then he looked at the crumpled document again. It was merely a *précis* as it were, written in a clerkly hand, of what the rescinded confidential instructions might have been, such as any one who by chance had seen them—or any scoundrel who had not—could easily have written. Absolutely unauthentic, and of no possible value, as proof of anything.

It was characteristic of Jack Raymond that the idea of taking back the notes which he had given Govind, as had been stipulated in advance, never occurred to him. He was a backer of odds, a better of bets. He had staked money lightly, and lost it. So far good; but he meant to have his money's worth.

'Hold up, you brute!' he said, as Govind writhed at the first touch on the scruff of his neck. 'I won't kill you, but you shall have the soundest licking you ever had in your life.'

As he spoke the lash of the hunting-whip, with which he always rode, curled round Govind's thin legs, making their owner in his sheer animal terror escape from Jack Raymond's

hold—strong as it was—to the floor, where he lay on his back, his limbs crunched together like a dead crab's—a hideous spectacle. So hideous that the very licking of such an abject beast seemed impossible.

'*Huzoor*, no!' he gasped. 'No, *Huzoor!* not that! not that! I will pay it back! I will pay—I will pay——'

'Get up, you brute, and take it decently,' interrupted Jack, feeling more decidedly that if the brute would not, he would have to give up the sickening business. He emphasised his command by another flick with the thong.

The crumpled crablike terror gave a sort of sob, and edged itself—still on its back—till it could kiss Jack Raymond's boots frantically. 'Not that! not that!' it moaned. 'I will pay—yea! I *can* pay!' Then in a purely insane fear of physical pain, Govind's English came back to him—'O my lord god almighty, I can give money's worth—I can give cheap—O lord god, yes! I can tell—listen, listen!' So, without a pause, he burst out into words which first made Jack Raymond hesitate, and then—catching the lash of the whip back into his hand—point to the corner and say, 'Sit down there, you skunk, and tell the truth; don't try to escape, or I really *will* do for you.'

The tale which came from between Govind's chattering teeth made the listener set his. Here was confirmation of old Khôjee's story with a vengeance; explanation also of the closed shops, the empty alleys. And the explanation was so natural. Given an amulet which brought death by the visitation of God at once, or, in lieu of that, death by removal to hospital and subsequent poisoning, what more obvious palliative—since God's act must stand—than to strike at the works of the devil? If, by dawn, neither hospitals nor doctors remained, that would surely mend matters. Meanwhile, in every house to which the cursed charm had gone, there must be purification by prayer and fasting, by spells, and incantations, and burnings of the hateful thing.

It did not need much imagination to picture the scene. A narrow court, a dead child or husband awaiting dusk for secret removal, shuddering excited women, hysterical from lack of food, listening to the denunciations of officiating priests and *mullahs*, looking at their dead, at their living—round whose wrists the amulet had been perhaps an hour before—and remembering that though half the evil in the

future lay with God, Who was beyond coercion, the other half lay with men who were!

Not a reassuring scene in a city whose two hundred and odd thousand inhabitants were curiously unreliable.

Still less so, because, if those immediately responsible had been true to their salt, all this information would have been in the strong hands of authorities hours ago.

That it had not been so when he left the club, Jack Raymond felt sure. Why! he had seen the city magistrate there reading the *Illustrated London News!*

'Who is in it? Who is working it? Come, hurry up!' he asked, with a significant dropping of the whip-lash.

Govind squirmed horribly, but protested ignorance. It was not that sort of trouble. No one had thought of it twenty-four hours ago, in spite of all the talk, all the misfortunes, in spite even of the conspirings. It had come of itself.

That was true, the listener knew. This sort of thing always did; but there were always people to help it on, and every hour that had been lost had increased the aiders and abettors. By now, half the city might be implicated.

He took out another thousand-rupee note and held it out.

'Take me to the most likely scoundrel,' he said briefly. 'You understand?'

Govind understood perfectly, and from abject terror passed to such infernal, such jubilant betrayal, that Jack Raymond put his hands and his whip behind his back in fear of using them. For he was going to see this thing through. He had still two thousand-rupee notes in his betting-book, and that in a native city meant much; the only caution necessary being not to bribe the wrong person.

He passed out into the bazaar with Govind, feeling a curious sense of power, a vast antagonism. He would be wise, he felt, to assure himself absolutely as to the trend any disturbance would take before going with his information to those who could checkmate it; for, he thought rapidly, a few companies of the native soldiers who were at hand could easily stave off action until proper arrangements could be made.

'It is among the railway people, Protector of the Poor,' said Govind fulsomely — he had reverted absolutely to Hindustani, its ways and works—'that there is most turbu-

lence. For the reason that there is a *baboo* in charge of works, so there is little fear among them. Then the Bengâlis—they have a dispensary of their own, with a saint who works miracles; so they——'

'*Chuprao!*' interrupted Jack Raymond sternly, 'and remember, if you try and throw dust in my eyes, I'll kill you!'

Yet, half an hour afterwards, he felt that he was no nearer a clear conception of what sort of solid backing these vague threats of violence had, than at the beginning. Every one was only too glad—for sums varying from ten to a hundred rupees—to tell what they knew, and, what is more, to pass the tale-telling on; but the result was not worth the wasted time.

He had told himself this should be his last trial, that time failed for more, when a pure accident put him in possession of certainty. He was coming down an almost pitch-dark tenement stair some little way behind Govind, when a door at the turn below opened and a man came out.

'Lo! Govind! is't thou? Well met!' said the newcomer in a low voice, looking no farther than the figure close to him, seen in the light from the door. 'Be ready for midnight. 'Tis to be the *Generali-hospitarl* first—all is arranged. I have a letter here——'

He was passing on downwards, but got no further in speech or step, for Govind—impelled by a kick from behind—fell on him like an avalanche, and the next moment Jack Raymond was beside the heap.

'The letter,' he said simply, 'give me the letter!'

He had a brief struggle for it, since this scoundrel had grit, till the butt-end of the whip came in savagely handy. By that time Govind had disappeared, rather to Jack Raymond's relief; so, leaving the owner of the letter stunned, he ran downstairs and put an alley or two between him and the scene of the swift scuffle, before looking at his prize; since, Englishman as he was, that was no quarter of the city in which to begin violence.

The letter, which was, of course, in the vernacular, was fairly lengthy, but he saw enough on the first page to make him turn to the end, then with a hurried exclamation take out his watch.

A quarter to six! The next moment he was off as quick as he dared for Government House. He chose the gate

giving on the Garden Mound as his exit from the city, since once there, he could run without fear of being stopped as a lunatic or a thief, and another reference to his watch, following on a swift calculation, warned him he had not much time to spare.

Being Sunday, there were no orderlies in waiting at the office entrance, and, knowing his way and the way of the place, he did not pause to call one, but passed on through the house to the entrance-hall, where some one was certain to be found.

He was right; but the person was not the one he expected. It was Lesley Drummond, ready in short skirt for a bicycle ride.

'Sir George!' he said sharply. 'I must see him at once!'

She stared at his hurry, his breathlessness. 'Sir George!' she echoed. 'He is not in. He has gone to lay the foundation-stone of the College — every one has gone. I only stopped because of Jerry not being quite well.'

She paused, startled, for Jack Raymond literally threw up his hands in impotent anger. Fool that he had been to forget! Of course! Everybody who could be of any use whatever, in this emergency, would be spouting rot five miles away on the other side of the city! If he had only thought of it before, and gone there instead of here! There might have been time, then, to arrange the only plan which was in the least likely—and now——

'What is it, Mr. Raymond?' came Lesley's voice. 'Let me help if I can.'

He shook his head. 'Nobody can—even I can't, though I know it's the only thing—that it ought to be done at once —that——' he broke off with an impatient gesture—'It's no use—it can't be helped!'

Lesley came a step nearer to him, with an odd look of resolve on her face.

'Do you mean that it would be wrong of you to do it, or that you haven't the right? I mean, is it something you could do if—if you were Sir George?'

The quickness of her perception made him say 'Yes?' frankly.

'Would Sir George do it if he were here?' followed sharply.

He gave another gesture of impatience. 'Don't let us

play clumps, for Heaven's sake!' he exclaimed. 'I'll tell you—though it's no good. There is a row on in the city to-night—the native regiment is in it—I have a letter here—or at any rate they won't be much help; and if once we get fighting in the streets——' he shrugged his shoulders—'the only way is to prevent it starting. And Morâdki is beyond call. But there's a wing of the Highlanders at Fareedabad, forty miles down the line. If I could have got a wire sent there before the mail passes—the up-mail which left here a little ago—it could have been stopped and sent back with troops. For Fareedabad is only an outpost—no railway stock—so there is only that one chance before midnight. There would have been time then—but now——'

'Then why don't you send one?'

'I?'

'Yes, you! You know the cipher. You know that Sir George would send it.'

'Pardon me!' he said, recovering his breath, recovering his obstinacy, his dislike to coercion, 'I am not in the least sure that he would. Judging by this morning——'

'Then *she* would—Lady Arbuthnot, I mean. And you—you are bound to do it for her—you know you are bound——'

'I?' he echoed again.

'Yes, you!' she repeated, and there was a quiver in her voice—'because you loved each other once. Oh! she didn't tell me—I have been learning a lot of things for myself lately, and I learned that because—but that is nothing! What I mean is, that it hurts her most, for she was wrong—quite wrong—she spoilt your life——'

'Perhaps I may be allowed to differ,' he began, stiffening himself again after his surprise; but she took no notice of his remark. Her face was troubled by her own thought—she was absorbed in it.

'It has come between you and everything, not the regret, but—I don't know what to call it quite—the value you have put upon it. And she has put it too. So you want to forget, and yet you don't. You think it so big a thing that it must be forgotten—made a fuss about. But it isn't. It isn't really part of one at all. I've learned that lately. And there is a better way'—she broke off, and came quite close to him, looking him in the face: 'not to forget, and yet not to

care. Do this for her, Mr. Raymond, do it as you would do it for me!' Here, for the first time, a faint smile showed in her eyes, not on her lips. 'It is a funny thing for me to say, perhaps, but—but I gave you the *râm rucki*, didn't I? And so, no matter what else there is in the world that, perhaps, we can't help, I want you to do this for her and for me together, as you would for a man, as I would do it for a woman.'

She laid her hand on his as she spoke, and held it there; not in a touch, but a clasp.

'And—and forget—whatever else there may be—always,' he asked steadily; 'forget for you both?'

'Please,' she replied quietly; 'for her and for me—always!'

For an instant—one short instant—the man's instinctive recognition of woman's goodness and kindness—and of something else, perhaps, which had lain behind the appeal—made Jack Raymond feel as if he must kiss the hand that lay on his; then he laid his other one on it, returning the clasp.

'But how on earth is it to be done?' he said, frowning as they stood thus, like children playing a game; 'the office won't take it without authority—some one's name—'

'Couldn't you sent it from here—I can signal. I've learned—oh! such a lot of things that have never been of any real use, and—No! they keep the instrument locked, I know—that won't do! I'll forge the name—I could—and I don't mind.'

He smiled. 'Nor I—they can't stop my promotion now. But the telegraph-office will be closed. I might get hold of some one, perhaps, by saying—No! for why shouldn't it have been sent from here! That question would stump us. We might try the railway station. Yes! of course! The wire to Fareedabad is only a railway one. Even the regular office could only pass it on. By Jove! that's lucky all round.'

She caught at the idea. 'Write it out quick—there are forms in Captain Lloyd's room over there! My bicycle's ready, I'll take it. How much time have I?'

'Plenty still.' He glanced round the room they had just entered and saw another bicycle. 'I'll take that, and save you lending yours.'

'But I'm coming too,' she put in swiftly. 'I must! I'm

only going, while you write, to tell the bearer to look after Jerry—he's in bed already—while I'm away. It won't take long.'

She was down the stairs again as he was wheeling the cycle into the hall, the still wet telegram loose in his hand.

'Hold that a minute,' he said, 'that tyre wants a pump—it will save time in the end. It wouldn't do to have a smash—would it?' He spoke quite cheerfully.

'No!' she replied, smiling back as she helped him. 'Not if there is going to be a "weal wow," as Jerry calls it.'

'Something very like one, anyhow!' he answered. 'And you never can tell what may happen if these things aren't stopped at once. We might have them all over the place by to-morrow morning—trying to pull down the flag perhaps—who knows?' He spoke lightly again, but for all that he had thought it worth while to pocket a revolver, which had been lying on Captain Lloyd's table; and as Lesley passed out first, with her bicycle, he gave a look at the weapon to see how many chambers were loaded; that was always a wise precaution.

So, being busy, neither of them saw a little figure in a scarlet flannel sleeping-suit which had stealthily followed Lesley downstairs; a listening little figure with wide grey eyes.

The next instant those two were careering down the Mall, fast as wheels could carry them.

'It is a quaint cipher,' said Lesley, who, hands off, was folding the now dry telegram.

'Yes!' replied Jack Raymond absently—he was working out what had to be done. 'I might send it plain, but for the *cachet* of authority—Heaven save the mark!—it gives. And, of course, the contents are better not known, even by the *baboo*. But I'm afraid he must know something; for I must first of all wire direct to the station-master at Fareedabad to stop the up-mail—there isn't time for the order to go through the magistrate. And that's really the thing to make sure of, for the down-mail doesn't pass Fareedabad till midnight, and it would take almost as long to get steam up from here—especially as it is Sunday and the railway people all over the place.'

There were not many of them certainly in the wide

deserted station, which echoed under their hurrying feet. Indeed, barring a few would-be native passengers, huddled up listlessly in their shawls waiting on the steps outside for the train, which experience told them would come sooner or later—figures common to every railway station in India—not a human being was visible. That, too, was nothing uncommon, when trains come four or five times a day at least. And the up-mail had passed but a short time before; so all things were at their slackest after that excitement.

'There must be some one, somewhere!' remarked Jack Raymond, 'and if not, I must break in to the telegraph-office, and you must signal.' Then he laughed. 'You are leading me horribly astray, Miss Drummond. I shall be transported for life before I know where I am.'

'They will have to transport me too, then,' she said cheerfully.

But there was no need for felonious entry. The telegraph-office door was open, and Jack Raymond, seeing a native clerk asleep inside, told Lesley she had better remain unseen for the time.

So she walked up the empty platform with its closed doors and looked down the lessening ribbon of line to the drawbridge pier, and came back again. Absorbed in her own thoughts, it was not until she heard the *click click* of a telegraph instrument, clearly audible in the dead silence, that she recognised she was passing beyond her goal. She pulled up to wait, to listen.

T—U—M— What on earth was the man signalling? And what symbol was that? Something she did not know. Had they a different code? No. S—H—S—H—K—those she recognised. But what a combination! Was it the cipher? No! she had seen that—that was mostly vowels——

Then it flashed upon her that the man was telegraphing nonsense—he was not telegraphing at all!—he was against them!

She had hardly realised this, when Jack Raymond came out. 'There! that's done, and God go with it,' he said hurriedly; 'the only thing is—what had we better do with the *baboo*? He must suspect. I have a thousand-rupee note left of your money. Shall I bribe him with it to keep quiet for two hours?'

'No!' she said swiftly, savagely; 'you had better kill him!' He stared.

'He hasn't sent them—the telegrams, I mean—at least not the last. It was all gibberish. I was listening.'

He gave a low whistle. 'By Jove!'—then he looked at her—'you *have* been of use.'

His pause was only for a second. 'You'd better come in with me, and lock the door—we shall have to see this thing through, I expect. I remember they told me some of the railway people were in it, and if that is so we must prevent them getting wind of this, till it's too late for *them*.'

With that he drew out his revolver and went in; and Lesley, following him, locked the door behind her.

CHAPTER XXIII

A MEMORABLE OCCASION

'A MEMORABLE occasion!'

The phrase seemed, somehow, to be inevitable on the further side of the city, where, as Râm Nâth had foretold, all of Nushapore that was worth considering was gathered together for the ceremony of laying the foundation-stone of the Anglo-Vernacular College. Râm Nâth may have started the assertion, but every one else followed suit. Sir George in his presidential address, the treasurer in his financial statement, the distinguished native official who—in proposing the vote of thanks to Lady Arbuthnot for her able assistance—managed to drag in the Dufferin fund and the benefits of female education by the way! So, one by one, the delegates of the various sects and associations who were, blissfully, to forget their differences over — — over this memorable occasion!

Some added a 'most' to it; others went so far as to say it marked an era; while a peculiarly eloquent speaker went one better by introducing the 'Annals of Empire.'

But the point on which they were all agreed was—that it *was* 'a memorable occasion.'

And there was curiously little unreality about the assertion, for everybody went about with a noticeable satisfaction that was due to a feeling of duty done. It was all infinitely proper; also pleasing, for when the initial ceremony was over and a pause came for tea between it and the giving of diplomas, it was quite a pretty sight to see the mixed multitude walking about admiring and criticising the building, that some time or another—for funds at the moment were a trifle low—would be built. And this had been made possible by the ingenious and distinctly novel device of laying out the site as a lawn, on which narrow

beds of flowers followed the lines of the foundations to come, while in the centre, under what was to be the central dome, stood a model (large enough to allow the delighted native visitors to creep through it if they chose), which had been made of bamboo, brown paper, and mud plaster by a distinguished toy artist in the city, who had had long practice in the making of *tazzias*[1] for the *Mohurrum* processions.

He stood beside his latest creation now, a perfect incarnation of smile in spotless white robes, with a muslin skull-cap on his well-oiled hair, ready to receive congratulations on his work. They were many, though the English people kept theirs chiefly for the garden.

'I wish I could make my pansies grow as evenly,' remarked one lady who was devoted to hers, as she looked enviously round the reading-room to be, that was outlined by a dense border of purple and yellow.

'Nothing easier!' replied the Secretary-to-Government, who was showing her round. 'Cut them to pattern with a foot-rule—they are only stuck in for the day!' He pulled up one as he spoke, showed it to her rootless, then stuck it in again with a laugh. 'It is a regular native dodge. They are A1 at making dream-palaces, you know. Curious, isn't it? that the mushroom should grow so well in India, the most conservative of countries; but cheap labour and cheap words are absolutely demoralising.'

'Stuck in! So they are,' echoed the gardening lady. 'Just a regular child's garden; but it looks well, doesn't it? Poor things!' she added, stooping to touch a pansy with the caressing touch of the flower-lover; 'but if they were only left alone for a time, you know, they would soon strike root.'

'Perhaps!' admitted the Secretary-to-Government dubiously, as they drifted off to the tea-table where Mrs. Chris Davenant—who had presented her bouquet with charming grace—was presiding, assisted by Chris in his frock-coat with a flower in his buttonhole.

He was, in the eyes of many around him, at the pinnacle of prosperity, for the Lieutenant-Governor, as he drank his tea, was talking to him (as Vice-President); yet he did not look happy, perhaps because he could catch a glimpse outside

[1] Models of the tombs of Hussan and Hussein.

the tent of Swâmi Viseshwar Nâth, standing apart from the ruck amid the little knot of high-caste Hindoos who had brought him there with blandishings and bribes, as ocular demonstration of the widespread sympathy and support the college was receiving from all classes of the community, and who had promised to be responsible for his bodily and spiritual immunity from defilement.

By and by, Chris knew, he would have to reckon with that figure, whose brown, bare shaven head, and brown, bare legs, showed beyond a short salmon-pink shirt hung with a rope of big brown beads matching the tint of the skin. Such an inconceivable, incredible figure, seen behind that of Mrs. Carruthers in her last Paris frock!

Yes! by and by Chris must make his choice. If it had only been for himself, that choice, it would have been easy; but it was for Naraini also——

Naraini! Naraini! Naraini!

The thought of her haunted him. Her very aloofness from such a scene as this, the impossibility of imagining her in any part of it, held him captive. No! there was no place here for such as she; not even in the tent where a few of the more emancipated wives, and sisters, and mothers of Shark Lane were, literally, on show to the elect; and whither Lady Arbuthnot was at that very moment being conducted by an elate but apologetic husband, who was saying with cheerful pomp—

'You will find them very stupid, since they have as yet enjoyed small benefit from liberal education; but time will show.'

Time will show! Undoubtedly; it was showing results already in the foundations of flowers through which the speaker was passing. Results that were oddly despotic, beyond the expectation or control of those who had planted that child's garden. The poppies, for instance, native to the soil as they were, had given up the pretence of root; the exotic pansies, on the other hand, winked boldly at the westering sun as at an enemy vanquished.

It was fate, or something beyond fate, even here.

'It really,' remarked Sir George almost mechanically, 'is a memorable occasion.'

'Very, indeed!' assented poor Chris, realising that it was one, at any rate, that *he* was not likely to forget.

'Excuse me!' put in the Commissioner, coming up hurriedly, 'but if I may, sir, I should like to have a word with you!'

Sir George put down his cup, Chris moved off, and so did the two officials, to converse earnestly as they circled round that toy model of the College to come.

'I agree that it is unfortunate,' admitted Sir George, pausing at last, a trifle impatiently, 'but I refuse to believe there is any immediate likelihood of disturbance. It is inconceivable with *this* going on. Every one looks content, except perhaps the pensioners. Jehân Aziz, I notice, is absent, but that is only decent—and one cannot wonder at their annoyance.' Here his glance fell resentfully on Mr. Lucanaster, who—the day being Sunday when no other entertainment was available—had honoured the 'memorable occasion' with his presence. 'That has been a most unfortunate business,' he continued, frowning, 'but you will admit that the Nawâb has, on the whole, behaved well in allowing both his wife's death and the girl's abduction—though, I believe, Lucanaster is, as he says, out of that—to be hushed up.'

'Why should he allow it? that's what I want to know, sir,' argued the Commissioner. 'There is something behind, depend upon it, and that is never satisfactory with a native. The whole thing is fairly maddening, just at a time when I wanted to feed the lot on soothing syrup—even the fact that that culpable homicide case in cantonments has to be hung up because the accused is ill with typhoid!'

'I wouldn't worry about it, though, Kenyon,' replied Sir George kindly, 'as I told Mr. Raymond this morning.'

'Raymond?' echoed the Commissioner eagerly. 'What did he say? His views are always interesting.'

The kindness vanished. 'Something of what you tell me. I disagreed with him, as I disagree with you. However, to show you that I have perfect confidence in your discretion, and also to back my own opinion—for, mind you, if I thought there was the very slightest chance of your having to use it, I would hesitate to give it—you shall have what you ask for, sanction to wire direct to Fareedabad after you have seen what the city is like for yourself, instead of returning to report. It might, as you say, make the difference of catching the midnight mail; though there really is no——' He shrugged his shoulders tolerantly. 'However, you had better have it in order,' he continued, taking out his pocket-book

and pencil with a certain elaborate patience, and finally, with a return to his usual kindly manner, holding out a duly signed and dated service-telegram. 'There!' he said, with a smile, 'I carry forms about with me these times. Now, mind, this is a personal favour for to-night only, Kenyon. I wouldn't do as much for any one else in India, and it is only to set your mind at ease; you can bring it back to me when you come to report! And now, for heaven's sake, let us get over this diploma business. I only wish I could come with you to the city, but I must see this show through.'

So, while the hoofs of the Commissioner's horse, as he rode citywards with the chief of the police and the magistrate who had brought the disturbing rumours, echoed down the hard white road, which was laid so evenly between a double row of mud roundels protecting lately planted trees, the show —as Sir George had called it—began. It was rather like a school-prize-giving, with men and women instead of children, for the inevitable table (covered with the twopenny-halfpenny *phul-kâri* made for the European market, which, with its sham Orientalism, has on such occasions replaced the honest red office baize) was set in front of Sir George and Lady Arbuthnot. On it were three packed posies in green glass tumblers, a pile of diplomas, duly made out in the recipients' names, and another pile of sham Oriental brocade bags in which to keep them.

'You belong, of course?' said the Secretary-to-Government, who was standing apart during the opening speeches, to a sunburnt little lady in a wide pith hat.

'Who, I?' she answered cheerfully. 'Oh dear, no—I am not often in at headquarters, and I get on all right with my schools and that sort of thing without it, so it doesn't seem worth while.'

'Perhaps not,' replied the man of headquarters, once more dubiously. It was impossible for him to avoid that attitude towards much that had to pass through his hands, so he set the doubtful point aside and listened to the President's certainties as he enlarged on the great need for closer ties of friendship and sympathy between the rulers and the ruled, and the excellent results to be expected from meetings of this kind. Then, of course, some one else spoke, and some one else. And outside the lawn, enclosed with grass hurdles, and set with those foundations of flowers, India was going

on its way as it had gone, untouched by change, for thousands and thousands of years; and two women, furtively sweeping up a prize of horse-droppings on the outskirts of the assemblage in order to make them into fuel, talked, as they swept, of the amulet that had promised safety and brought death.

'Will you come, please, and form up in line,' said a steward, fussily collecting his candidates among the listening circle. 'It will look better, and save time.'

'Oh dear! I hope I shan't get put next a native,' murmured one little lady, quite plaintively, as she obeyed.

The Secretary-to-Government, who overheard the remark, smiled; still dubiously.

He smiled again, and so did some others, when Mrs. Chris Davenant came up to receive a diploma which—it had occurred to her astuteness—might be worked to her advantage in English society. Perhaps the reflection that she had already shown her willingness to enter into social relations with the other race was accountable for these smiles, but she herself, and Chris too, were quite grave over it.

The latter, indeed, could not at the moment have been otherwise over anything in heaven or earth; for not five minutes past, as he stood dully indifferent on the edge of that circle of listeners, he had felt a touch on the sleeve of his frock-coat; heard a low voice.

'To-night, Krishn, at the "Circling of the Lights" in Kâli's shrine. We meet there, Her priests and His, to settle this matter. And thou must be there also.'

He had not turned to see who the speaker was; he had known all too well. For the moment he could have laughed aloud at the hideous incongruity of it, with Viva standing there waiting for her diploma.

It was growing late. The light atoms were trooping in streams across the western sky, crowding closer and closer into rays as they sought shelter from the coming darkness in the sinking sun. There was a great hush over all things, in which Grace Arbuthnot's voice, as she read out the names of the recipients, could be distinctly heard. A hush, not a silence: that cannot come within earshot of a great city.

'It has taken longer than I thought,' remarked one of the stewards, yawning, when—at long last—the list came to an end.

'Gracious!' exclaimed Mrs. Chris—horrified at the watch Mr. Lucanaster showed her sulkily—'we shall be late. Here, Chris! take this thing while I put on my jacket.'

She thrust the diploma into her husband's hand, and left it there, as she hurried into the dusk after Mr. Lucanaster, who had gone to search for his dogcart.

'Jerry will be fast asleep, I expect,' said Grace Arbuthnot regretfully, as she settled herself in the carriage beside Sir George, 'for I told Lesley to put him to bed early and give him some bromide. Oh! there is nothing the matter with him, George! Only, you know, he gets a little over-excited sometimes when he has a touch of fever, and bromide sets him off to sleep nicely. I am sorry Lesley couldn't come this afternoon—it must have been dull for her at home!'

Dull, however, was the last word Lesley Drummond would have applied to that afternoon's experience. When she had followed Jack Raymond into the telegraph-office at the station, she had simply obeyed orders, not knowing in the least what was going to happen. He had, however. He had walked straight up to the clerk, who had turned deadly grey-green at his reappearance, and seized him by the throat; so that violence was over, and the offender in collapse on the stool behind him, by the time that Lesley had locked the door and looked round.

'Will you come here, please?' Jack Raymond said to her quietly. 'You'll find a pencil and paper, I expect, on the table—and where is the cipher telegram—oh, there!—that will do. Now, *baboo*, telegraph that right, will you? Miss Drummond, if you will look over and tick the letters off as he signals them, and *let me know when he makes a mistake*, I'll —I'll settle it!'

He drew the revolver out of his pocket as he spoke, and stood to one side to let those two pass to the instrument. 'Of course, *baboo*,' he continued, 'the lady, who—unfortunately for you—can signal, could do it herself, but I prefer that you should do what you are told. Do you understand?'

The greyness and the greenness became almost deathlike. And Lesley Drummond's colour forsook her also. Would it be a death-warrant she would have to give by looking up and saying 'Wrong'? It might be. His face—the face she was accustomed to see so careless—looked stern enough

now even for that. Yet it might be needful. This treachery —there had not been time to exchange a single word about it—might mean so much. But *he* would know how much, and so be able to judge.

Yet as she bent over the telegram, ticking the—to her—unmeaning cipher off, letter by letter, she felt that her heart echoed that uneven shudder of the handles; and she felt that Jack Raymond's eyes upon her, as he watched for a sign, were like the eyes of fate. Would she have to give that sign? And if so, what would happen? There was no thought of pity *for the man* in her mind, only a great dread, a horrible apprehension, of this responsibility *for herself*. Yet it must be so; she knew that, though the words, 'Don't —don't, please, don't—oh! don't be a fool,' came constantly to the very verge of her lips.

'Is that all?' asked Jack Raymond, when a longer pause than usual came. She felt quite sick and giddy with relief as she nodded—for even now she feared lest a look up might be construed into a sign.

'I ought to have told you—before you began—that his sort aren't obstinate,' he went on observantly. 'There is no fear of—of *that*—Miss Drummond! So now, please, for the station-master. And I think it will be better to tell them not to wire back. There are evidently railway men in this affair; besides, we mustn't risk being found out too soon, must we? So "extreme caution" and "utmost secrecy" is our game—the great thing is to get the troops started before we *are* found out.'

Found out! Lesley had hardly realised that view of the matter as yet, and the thought gave her a qualm. Yet she went on checking the *baboo*'s signals and the brief answers that were asked for, just to show that the orders were understood.

When that was over, Jack Raymond looked at the *baboo* distastefully, then turned to the girl—'I'm puzzled what to do with him,' he said in French; whereat the *baboo* seemed to give up all hope of escape and sank in a dejected heap on the floor, rocking himself backwards and forwards, and murmuring, 'I quite innocent man—oh, my lord! innocent as suckling babes,' until Jack bid him be quiet.

'It is no use wasting time by trying to find out how far he is in it. He would only lie, and I know enough for the present. As I told you coming along, the danger is in the

native regiment refusing to keep order, if they are *asked* to do so. That would be mutiny, and the knowledge of the penalty would make the men reckless, and there might—excuse me—be the devil of a row! What we want to do is to avoid the necessity for asking them, by having other men available. They won't be wanted before ten o'clock at earliest—the rush on the hospitals was to be about midnight. The Fareedabad fellows should be here, at latest, by nine—plenty of time! And if we let Sir George and Co. know what we have done by, say, eight o'clock, that should do. It is no use giving ourselves away too soon, and the thing we have to make certain of is that the Fareedabad men do come up to time. Now, I could tie the *baboo* up and lock the door on him, but how am I to guard against the likelihood of fellow-conspirators coming to look after him? *They* might get to sending telegrams; they may be sending them now through the other office for all I know, in which case they must be stopped here. At any rate, this man must have been on his guard against any communication with Fareedabad, or he would not have been so sharp. In fact, if we had gone to the Post Office, he would never have repeated our message; for, as I told you, the only wire to Fareedabad is the railway one. *That*, I expect, is why he was on duty. However, I'm inclined to think we had best stop here, for a time, and make certain. Of course, if one of us could stop and the other go, it might be best. But I can't do without you—a message might come through any moment and I should be in *his* hands, the brute!—he thought himself quite safe, and would have been, but for you! You locked the door, didn't you?'

He walked over to it, however, to make sure of the fastening, and then pushed the heavy office table across it. 'They may have duplicate keys, and I don't want them inside,' he explained. Then he stood for a moment looking at the girl—'I'm awfully sorry; but you won't mind, I know. I wonder if there is a cushion anywhere to make you more comfortable. No! but a ledger will be better than the bare floor.' He took one or two and placed them behind the table. 'Now, if you don't mind sitting down there, where I can see you and nobody else can—even if we have to open the shutter—that will do nicely.' Then he turned to the heap in the corner. 'Now get up, *baboo-jee*,' he said politely, 'and resume your

duties; you can sit on that stool. If anybody comes along, keep quiet, and don't open the shutter till I give the signal. Then you can transact business as usual. But mind, if you try it on again, the Miss-*sahiba* will warn me, and I will—warn you.'

He laid the revolver ostentatiously on the table, then—borrowing the *baboo*'s comforter, which was hanging on a peg—he sat down at the table in a beautifully *baboo*-esque attitude with his legs twined round his chair.

'Will I do?' he asked gravely of Lesley when he had finished making himself a smoking-cap out of black transfer-paper, and she could not help laughing softly.

'I assure you it is very serious,' he said, smiling also; 'and I 'm awfully sorry to keep you; but you ought to get back in time for dinner.'

'Dinner!' she echoed, a trifle hurt, 'surely dinner——'

'Is a minor matter? Never! Besides, I hope to God we are both going to have a *good* dinner to-night; for that means—success. There is no earthly reason why there *should* be a row, you know. If we see this through, and the troops come up to time——' he paused, lost in his own previsions. 'Well,' he said finally, 'we had better not talk. A native's bare feet are more inaudible than our whispers, and it won't do to be found out. So—steady it is for an hour or so.'

An hour! Lesley's heart sank after the first ten minutes. They seemed interminable to her, seated on the ledgers behind the table. She could just see Jack Raymond at the other end of it, his head down on his crossed arms. Was he dozing? As likely as not; he was just that sort; while her nerves were quivering. The action had been well enough; the excitement of that had carried her with it; but now——? What if Mr. Raymond's estimate of the danger had been excessive? He had once, long ago, fired on a mob in too great haste. At least Government had thought so. What had possessed her, in a moment, to trust his judgment absolutely—to cast in her lot with his, as it were, unreservedly? She blushed even in the darkness, that was fast obscuring all things, at the thought——

'You had better light the lamp, *baboo*. There is one, isn't there? by your desk,' came his voice calmly.

Then he was not asleep!

—And he was very kind. But if they were found out?

If they asked her why she had done this thing, what would she answer? What *could* she say to Grace Arbuthnot, who had been wiser; even though she had loved——

The lamp flared up under the *baboo*'s trembling fingers and showed her face.

'You poor child!' came his voice again, 'I'm bitterly sorry; but it can't be long now; and—and let's hope for that good dinner!'

She was glad of the jesting finish, glad that the lamp went out this time under those trembling fingers. When it flared up again she was ready to be more cheerful. And it was an easier task after that, for the deadly quiet passed and the thrill came into life again, making her forget the question—What if they should be found out?—in the possibility of being found out all too soon.

For some one tried the handle of the door hurriedly, called loudly on Mohun Ditta to come out and report; then after a time departed with curses.

'You had better open the shutter, *baboo*,' said Jack Raymond; 'and go on, not exactly as if I wasn't here—that mightn't be safe under the circumstances—but as if you were thinking of your pension.'

'Yes, sir,' bleated the *baboo*, 'I will do best endeavours to please.'

So silence fell again, to be broken by another step outside; clearly an English step, making the listener at the table look up as the steps died away.

'Here, *baboo*! send this off quick!' came an English voice; and Jack Raymond had hard work not to look round.

But the wire was only to lay odds on a race in Calcutta; and even the strain of listening for each unknown letter did not come to Lesley, for the *baboo* showed the adaptability of his kind, by reading out the words loudly and saying, 'Is that right, sir?' to the sender.

'I hope so, *baboo*!' said the English boy with a laugh, 'or I shall be stony broke!' So the steps died away once more.

'Only twenty minutes left!' remarked Jack Raymond as silence fell again; but not for long. The first voice came back—this time to the shutter—full of reproaches; and the frantic anxiety of the *baboo* to keep the conversation within bounds, and prevent anything absolutely incriminating from

cropping up, made one listener smile as he sat pretending to copy way-bills into a ledger. And when the voice passed on, and he turned to look, he laughed outright to see the wretched creature mopping the perspiration off his forehead.

'Had about enough?' he began, then paused, for an imperative 'kling kling' rang out from the electric bell.

'Asking if the line is clear,' said Lesley from her post, and Jack Raymond rose and stretched himself.

'Then that's over! The train has reached Bahâna, and we can go—and—and face the rest!' He held out his hand to help her to rise.

Face it! Could she? She hesitated, and at that moment a step sounded outside, rapid, with a clink in it—the clink of spurs!

'Here, *baboo*!' said a guttural Northern voice. 'This for dispatch—*be-rung* (bearing) *Sirkâri*. Take it, fool—I have no time to lose—and give receipt!'

There was a pause, then the clink of spurs passed again, and Jack Raymond, who had slipped into his chair, crossed to the desk, looked over the *baboo*'s shoulder at the telegram, which was in cipher, and turned to Lesley smiling.

'Perhaps we shan't have to face it after all! They are sending to Fareedabad off their own bat. Well! better late than never!' There was a ring of bitterness in his voice.

'You mean——' began Lesley, who had crossed too, and now stood looking down at the official signature below the cipher with a half comprehension.

'That they will be a bit surprised when the troops turn up at nine; but stay! we can dodge them a bit! *Baboo!* what time was this telegram given in?'

The *baboo* glanced at the clock. 'A quarter to eight, sir.'

'Nothing of the kind!' contradicted Jack Raymond in a tone of voice which turned his hearer grey-green once more; 'it came in at—let me see, what is the latest I can give it?—twenty minutes to seven. Fill that in, *baboo*, and file it—not there, you fool!—below the other one—*that* didn't come in till half-past! You won't forget these facts, will you? If you don't, I—I won't remember that you made a *mistake in telegraphing* at first. Do you understand? Now, Miss Drummond, you should have just time to get home and dress for dinner.'

After he had pushed away the table and unlocked the door, she followed him out into the still almost-deserted station without a word. A lamp or two had been lit; at the farther end a group of coolies lounged; closer in, a light showed from an office.

'I'll bring the cycles,' said Jack Raymond, and she passed out from the semi-darkness and shadow into the clear dusk beyond, and stood waiting, full of a vague amazement at herself and all things.

Behind the long line of sheds, the overhanging bastion belonging to the Royal Pensioners rose dark against the sky, where the sunset still lingered pale, flawless. But the risen moon turned the slanting silhouette into a reality of brick and mortar, and the dark spots crowning it to the figures of men.

And overhead, those specks in the pearl grey were kites; for the 'Sovereignty of Air'—delayed by the necessity for some of the competitors appearing on the 'memorable occasion'—had not yet been awarded. Five or six kites still floated for the supremacy, and many a pair of dark eyes watched them, wondering which would soar the longest, and gain the Kingship. Lateefa's most of all, as in his capacity of kite-maker to the Royal Family he pulled in each kite as it sank, and added it to the bundle of the vanquished. Only six kites left, and one of them carried the sign of Kingship with a vengeance; for he had been too late, as he had feared he would be, in his visit to the courtyard. Six kites, and which of them held the ring?

No wonder his eyes never left those hovering specks that still defied the falling dew.

But Lesley, looking at them also, scarcely realised that they *were* kites. She was absorbed by her own mean miserable lack of backbone. She had shrunk, she told herself, from the possibility of having to face failure hand-in-hand, as it were, with Jack Raymond, and now she shrank from losing her hold on his success. Or was it her hold on him—the man himself?

'You will just have time if you scorch,' he said in cheery haste as he came down the steps. 'I'm going round first to see if those in authority know all I do. If they do, they can't help falling into line with—with *our* plans, and we can fall out! But I shall suggest that if, by chance, the up-mail

was a bit late, the Fareedabad people might have taken advantage, etc. It will be as well to prepare the way for the troops arriving, before they're supposed to have started!'—he paused at the look on her face. 'At least I *can* do so! Of course, if you would rather *not* back out—but, as far as I'm concerned, I think it would be better to lie low, until the row's over, at any rate. Afterwards, it may be necessary—or you might wish——'

She shook her head hastily as she mounted.

'Good-bye,' he said, holding out his hand; 'and—and—your way *is* better, Miss Drummond!'

Better! As she sped through the warm peaceful dusk she felt herself a fraud, for she could have cried because it was all over—because she was losing her hold on him!

But everything was a fraud; the peaceful dusk most of all, since its peacefulness held danger, perhaps death. Not unknown, unlooked-for, but expected, appraised——

The gong was sounding as she raced up to the portico, a carriage stood at the door, some guests for the Sunday dinner-party were stepping out of it. She would be horribly late, and what excuse could she make to Lady Arbuthnot?

None was needed. As she came out of her room again after an incredibly short space of time, and ran down-stairs, she overtook Grace coming from hers.

'Oh! Lesley,' she said, turning as she fastened her bracelet, 'I wanted to see you, and I haven't had a moment since I came in. Sir George is called out—the Commissioner met us on our way back. It is trouble in the city—but George has sent for troops, and they say it will pass over, as it was *taken in time*. But, of course, no one is to know—so George, remember, has a touch of fever, and everything is to go on as usual.'

'I'm—I'm very sorry,' said the girl lamely.

'Sorry!' echoed Grace, 'I'm not sure if I am. I felt it would come, and I'm glad, oh! so glad, that George was so prompt! It will be well over, and it *must* be so, for it was taken *in time*, you see. By the bye! how was Jerry this afternoon? I only had time to glance in at the door as I ran up to dress, but he didn't stir, so he must have gone to sleep all right—Needham said he hadn't been talking.'

Lesley, who had not had time even for that glance, felt

relieved. 'Oh! he was very happy. I put him to bed, and gave him what you left before I went out on my cycle.'

The next moment she had passed into the circle of expectant guests in the drawing-room, and was adding her apologies for being late to Lady Arbuthnot's.

'Bicycling is a very wholesome exercise,' gravely remarked the young assistant—in for a Saturday to Monday from an out-station—who took her in to dinner.

'Very,' she replied as gravely, telling herself that a vertebrate creature had some excuse for not being able to control its backbone, when it was uncertain if it had to stand on its head or its heels.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF AIR

AFTER Lesley had gone home to dinner, and Jack Raymond—in quaint contrast—was off to make certain that a rising in the city was expected before long, the station settled down once more into the silence and slackness of between-train time on a Sunday evening. The listless passengers to be, it is true, still sat in groups on the steps outside, and every now and again some one—who ought to have been on duty and was not—gave a look in, and went off again. Once, indeed, an assistant station-master called at the telegraph-office perfunctorily; but the *baboo* had by that time recovered from his paralysis of terror, and begun to see his own advantage clearly. True, he had so far been in with the conspirators, as to have promised his collaboration, should the authorities be enough on the alert to use the telegraph to Fareedabad; but in doing so he had thought himself safe from detection. He had not been so; but now he had once more a hope of safety that wild horses would not have dragged him to lessen. Therefore the assistant station-master went, as he had come, in ignorance of anything unusual.

Up on the turret of the bastion too, which abutted on to the river only a few yards from the first bridge-pier, and which therefore gave full on the station, the kite-flyers went on with their match undisturbed. Jehân was there and Burkut Ali, together with most of the Royal Family; the former jubilant because his kite was one of those still defying the falling dew. And Lateefa was there also, his pile of vanquished kites growing steadily. He sat on the ground beside it, his slender hands crossed over his knees, his thin, acute face upturned. It had an odd amusement on it, and every time he rose to pull in a fresh victim, his high trilling voice quavered of 'oughts' and 'naughts.'

And on the bathing-steps, also, down on the other side of the terraced track which ran between them and the turret, there was peace. They were, in fact, emptier than usual at that hour; for the 'Circling of the Sacred Lights' must be nigh at hand, since the priests were already coming for the office; among them, Viseshwar Nâth——

The *baboo* saw him, and *salaamed* at the unusual sight, when —with his whole-hearted betrayal of everything likely to be a personal disadvantage—he walked out beyond the station to satisfy himself that the signalman obeyed his instructions. For realising—as he sat on his stool, still trembling with fear lest by any mischance the soldiers should not come in time and he be blamed for it—that it was necessary to have 'line clear' for the unexpected train, he had sought out the right man, and told him that a special from the north had just been wired to pass through Nushapore in half an hour on its way south. So he stood watching, waiting to see the red light change to green on the tower-pier, and catch the first echo of that change in the far distance at the other end of the bridge. And as he stood, he beguiled his fat body and mind from a faint remorse, by telling himself that, under the circumstances, he was doing the wisest thing for his own party also—that party of progress which had seized on the ignorant alarm of the herd as a fitting time in which to record their own protest against illegal tyranny. Since, if their plans had been blown upon, they were better postponed.

He heaved a sigh of relief, therefore, when the signal 'Line clear, go ahead' showed close at hand and far off. But at the same moment he heard a step behind him, and turned hastily to see Chris Davenant. Chris, still in his frock-coat and with a flower in his buttonhole; with his wife's diploma of membership in the 'Guild for Encouraging Intercourse between the Rulers and the Ruled,' also, in his pocket. For he had not been home since he left the 'memorable occasion'; neither to the home in Shark Lane, nor the home in the city, nor that betwixt-and-between home in the garden of plantains. In a way they all claimed him, and yet they were all alike insufferable, impossible to the man himself. Looking round his world, there was but one thing which brought no sense of revolt with it; and that was his work. He felt that if he could leave, not one thing, but all things behind him save this, life might still be endurable.

And so, when the foundations of flowers (freshened for the time into a promise of stability by the romance of moonlight) were deserted alike by the Rulers and the Ruled, he had, almost mechanically, wandered off to the scene of that work, and had ever since been strolling up and down among the general litter and order of his new goods station. It soothed him. The sight of the piles of brick that would fall into line after his plan, the whole paraphernalia brought together to give form to his idea—an idea which would take shape bit by bit according to *his* will as surely as the sun would rise—comforted him. And yet it brought no strength for the moment that was coming, as surely.

Half-past eight! And at nine the Circling would begin. Half an hour left—for it would not take him a minute to reach the temples—they were close enough——

Close! God in heaven! they were too close! Was it possible to escape from them? was there foothold for an honest man between them and the Palace of Lies in which he had lived so long?

Was there? Only half an hour left for decision, and he had not argued out the matter with himself at all. He had only felt.

He *must* think; and that seemed impossible out here with the moonlight showing each rib of the skeleton roof, each tier of bricks waiting for the next.

And above those black girders—so strong, so tense—were the faint stars. And among them—what?—kites!

He gave a bitter laugh, and told himself that he must get away from fancies into facts. He would go into the little galvanised iron shed, dignified by the name of the office, and there, with pen and paper before him, think the matter out solidly. Yes! with pen and paper. He had always been at his best with them, and the memory of many an examination was with him, idly, as he walked across the line to the station on the other side of it, to borrow a light. But the only ones—in the telegraph and the assistant station-master's offices—were behind closed doors; and so, seeing a figure at the end of the platform, outlined against the distant dimness of bridge and river, he went on towards it.

'I want a lamp, *baboo*; bring one over to my office, I have to look up some figures,' he said curtly; for the excuse had brought back the memory of something else that he had

promised to see to in the works, and Jân-Ali-shân's advice having come back also, made him speak more after the manner of the master than usual.

That—and the frock-coat possibly—produced an instant and almost servile obedience on the part of the *baboo*, whose mind was still in that state of dissolution which crystallises round the least thread of authority.

So, the lamp being brought, Chris sat down and tried to figure out facts.

Taking it from the point of abstract Right and Wrong, to begin with——

He leant his head on his hand and thought; but five minutes after had to pull himself up from a vague regret that already he had failed—he had held back information—though he had promised Mr. Raymond, who had always been so kind——

What a fool he was! What had these personal details to do with it?

He bent himself to his task again. Right and Wrong! Higher and Lower! Yet when, by chance, he looked at the paper before him on which he had been idly jotting down the heading of his subject, it was not 'Right or Wrong,' 'Higher or Lower,' that he saw. It was 'Naraini'!

He stood up then and faced himself; and her! He *could* marry her—Viva would not mind—she could not help it, anyhow, she had taken the risk! What if he *did*? And then—then went back on the priests!—then chose——

For a moment he stood tempted, as he had never been tempted in his life before.

And then the door burst open, and the *baboo*, stuttering, blubbering in his haste, almost fell at his feet.

'Oh, sir, come! You are nearest in authority. Come and issue order sharp. You are master, sir! Stop them, or this poor devil of *baboo* is lost. Issue order, sir, and stop them from the bridge!'

'The bridge!' echoed Chris, completely at fault, 'what bridge?'

'Drawbridge, sir,' almost shrieked the *baboo*, 'and express train coming *instanter*. Oh! what can do? Oh! this poor devil, this poor innocent devil!'

He was grovelling now, and Chris bade him stand up and

speak Urdu, almost as Jack Raymond had bidden Govind. But as *he* listened to the *baboo*'s words, each one, each phrase did not translate itself into a definite aspect of the one central fact that had to be reckoned with; and so, when the tale ended in fresh blubbers, he was not ready to act—he had to think! The very keenness of his intellectual apprehension claimed clear perception of all points, and he hesitated as he recapitulated them.

Trouble expected in the city—ah! about the amulets, no doubt—why had he not spoken? Troops sent for to Fareedabad, and coming sooner than the authorities expected. How could that be? Coming in a few moments, and the fact of their having been sent for leaking out through the second telegram, the Commissioner's telegram! Why had there been two telegrams?

'Oh, Lord God!' moaned the *baboo*, reverting to English at this question, 'because this poor devil of a *baboo* one fool! Yet doing duty, sir—getting line clear, go ahead, all serene till *Kuzai* fellows come bribing signalman for midnight train, so discovering special, beat this poor body to bruises—Oh, sir! issue orders! issue orders!'

Chris, in a whirl, stood aghast. Issue orders? What orders?

'Yes, sir! Ah! come and see, sir, and issue orders!' moaned the *baboo* again.

Come and see? Well! he could at least do that! He dashed out at the door, and, followed breathlessly by the *baboo*, cut across the line. As he did so a figure, crouching by the telegraph-office, ran towards the bridge end of the station. In the moonlight he saw the man's face, and recognised him as one of his butcher's gang.

He pulled up short, the consciousness that *this* was something in which he could be no mere onlooker, but one in which his part must be played as that man's superior officer, coming to him. And as he paused, looking down the narrowing ribbon of steel, he gave a quick gasp of comprehension. All lay silent, peaceful, but against the dark shadow of the pier-tower a darker shadow was rising, and below it that narrowing ribbon of steel ended sharp, square, as if cut off with a knife.

The drawbridge was being raised!

Yet above it the green light of safety, the signal '*Line*

clear, go ahead' shone bright, and was echoed from the faint moonshine and the deepening dark over the river.

And troops, in a special train, were almost due. At the very moment, indeed, a sudden ringing of an electric bell from the telegraph-office could be heard distinctly in the silence. The sound seemed to finish the *baboo*; he squatted down on the rails, murmuring, 'Oh, flag-station now! Oh, coming *instanter*! Oh, please, master, issue orders!'

No! not orders; something beyond orders surely! Who was it—was it he himself in a different life?—who had been through this before, with some one who had said, '*But we don't let 'em. No, sir! Two men, if they was men, 'ud keep that pier a Christian country for a tidy time.*'

But he was only one, for that thing at his feet was not a man! The old north-country contempt for the down-country swept through Chris as fiercely as contempt for the east sometimes sweeps through the west; as, no doubt, it sweeps through the east for the west!

'How many were there?' he asked swiftly. 'Of the gang, I mean.'

'Too many,' moaned the *baboo*; 'oh, sir, too many for one poor man. Therefore *vis et armis* forced into telling truth on compulsion because, they knowing already of train and troops, little knowledge became dangerous thing causing grievous hurt.'

'How many?' reiterated Chris fiercely; 'don't "men in buckram"!' He could not help the quotation, even then.

Five or six! And the man who had run forward was one, left as a scout, of course. And that must be another in the shadow of the city wall, close to the gap. Say three or four, then, on the bridge-pier; and behind him? He turned city-wards, then realised that if—if the *pier was to be held as a Christian country*, it would not matter how many men were on this side of the drawbridge, provided those three or four on the pier could be reckoned with.

If! The next moment, still uncertain what he should *do* to gain his object, yet intellectually certain of that, he had run along the platform, swung himself over the low parapet of the retaining-wall, and dropped on to the bathing-steps, the top of which was here not six feet below the level of the line. And below him again the temple of *Mai* Kâli rose out of the levels of the river; rose from the sunken ridge of rock,

on which, farther out in the deeper stream, the drawbridge tower was built; the ridge along which he must pass, since he was no swimmer, if he was to gain that iron ladder.

There were lights in the temple; twinkling lights. In his headlong rush downwards he could see the many-armed, blood-red idol between the figures of those circling round it with the sacred lamps. And that compelling clang of the temple bell was in his ears. Yet he did not pause. He was on the threshold, when it was barred by Viseshwar Nâth.

'Not yet, Krishn! Not yet! The penance first, the vow first!'

'It is not that,' gasped Chris, forgetful of the possibility, nay, the probability, that what to him was dire misfortune might be to this man a very different thing. 'It is treachery, murder! a train is due; they have raised the drawbridge. Look! and let me pass.'

The drawbridge! Half a dozen worshippers grouped about the plinth heard the words and looked bridgewards; so did the Swâmi, and seized his advantage.

'Take thy shoes from off thy feet, Krishn Davenund,' he called in a louder voice, 'and vow the vow first!'

The circling priests within paused at the sound, and crowded to the temple door; the scattered worshippers, curious at the strange sight, closed in round the figure in the frock-coat, the figure in the saffron-shirt.

Yet there was something stranger to come. For from within, pushed to the front at a sign from the Swâmi, came two more figures: a widow, her face hidden in her white shroud, a slender slip of a girl with hers hidden in her bridal scarlet.

Chris fell back from the sight with a cry.

'Choose quick, Krishn!'

Choose! How could he choose, when behind those shrinking figures which meant so much to him, he could see that which, in a way, meant more. For, hidden in the arched shadows of the temple, wafted to him in the perfume of incense and fading flowers—yes! symbolised even in the red-armed idol—was the great Mystery of Right and Wrong, Higher and Lower, which had haunted him all his life. It was years since he had stood so close to these eastern expressions of a world-wide thought, and the old awe came back to him at the sight.

Choose! How could he choose between old and new—even between Viva and Naraini; were they not the same? were they not both——

'Now then, guv'nor! wot 'ave you lost this time?' came a cheerful voice, and with it the sound of shod feet running down the steps. 'You jes' put a name to wot you want done, an' I 'm blamed if the best A1 copper-bottomed as ever was 'all-marked——'

Jân-Ali-shân paused, for Chris, with another cry—a cry that had a ring of appeal in it like a lost child's—had caught at the newcomer's hand desperately, while he pointed with his other to the gap.

'The bridge!' he cried in frantic haste. 'Look! the gang, the *Kuzais* have got at it; there is a train signalled; a train——'

He was going on, but that was enough for Jân-Ali-shân. More than enough! He had wrenched his hand away, turned to look for some weapon, and found one. Found it in the soda-water bottle closely netted round with twine, prolonged into a cord handle, which pilgrims carry so often, and which hung on the wrist of one close by him.

The next instant it was whirling—a veritable death-dealer—round his head, as he dashed forward among the little knot of people outside the temple, and the whole strength of his splendid voice rose echoing over the steps in a triumphant chant—

'I was not born as thousands are.'

There was a free path so far—

'Where God was never known.'

He paused here in the narrow entry to say, 'Stand back, my darlin's, we ain't got no quarrel with you'; and then, facing the priests inside, to call back—

'Now for it, sir!—use your fists on the *Ram-rammers* if they tries to stop yer!'

'And taught to pray a useless prayer.'

The words were broken a bit by blows, an oath or two, yells and desperate scuffling, until—breathless but continuous—the chant rose again among the shadows and the incense—

'To blocks of wood and stone!'

Here Jân-Ali-shân, clear of all his adversaries save the Swâmi, who stood with upraised hands barring the way before the image of *Mai* Kâli, pushed the former aside and aimed a passing swing at the latter.

The crash of a fall mingled with his gay 'Yoicks forre'd! gone away! gone away!' and the next moment, closely followed by Chris, he was through the temple and waist-deep in the water beyond.

'Mum's the word now, sir!' he whispered, when—after having given Chris a heft up to the lowermost rung of the iron ladder, which hung on the pier—he swung himself up by sheer strength, and then paused for breath. 'How many on them are there, I wonder?'

'Not more than four or five,' whispered Chris, as he climbed. The man behind him made no answer, but Chris could hear him mutter the old complaint—'It don't give a fellow a chanst—it don't, really.'

So, stealthily, they were on the bridge in the rear of the tower.

'Like a thief in the night, sir,' whispered Jân-Ali-shân approvingly. 'Of that day an' hour, as it say in 'Oly Writ—that's the ticket. An' you lay a holt on somethin' 'andy, sir; even a broken brick's better nor trustin' to Providence—there's a biggish bit on the track, sir. An'—an' don't waste time killin'; it's the bridge we want, not the butchers. Now for it!'

Were there four or five of them, or fifty, in the almost pitch darkness of the little inner room? Chris never knew. It was a confused struggle, short, sharp, silent; till, suddenly, John Ellison's voice called—

'That'll do, sir! I've bagged three on 'em, and can't find no more. Now to business!'

He was out as he spoke in the dim light to lay his ear to the rails. And as he listened, he smiled to see a couple of figures scudding for bare life along the single rails as only coolies can do, in hope of shelter from the coming train in the safety, half-way across the bridge.

''Ave to be nippy, my sons,' he remarked affably as he rose, more leisurely, and, from habit, dusted the knees of his trousers as he turned to look stationwards.

But what he saw there made him stop the dusting and swear under his breath.

A little crowd had gathered on the farther side of the gap; a hostile crowd armed with sticks and stones. And with more!

For a bullet whizzed past between him and Chris, who had followed him out, and the sharp report of a rifle roused the echoes of the city wall; and roused, also, a sudden sense of strain, of anxiety, in thousands within the wall; thousands till then ignorant that disturbance was in the air, or at least that it *could* come so soon!

Even on the turret, amid the schemers and plotters ready—perhaps inevitably—to fall in with any quarrel, this was so; for something else had been in the air, absorbing the attention. Some of those there had remarked, it is true, on the raising of the drawbridge, but others had been ready to tell of the day, not long ago, when it had been so raised and lowered many times without cause, and without result.

So the attention of all had reverted to the two kites which now remained overhead among the faint stars. They were Jehân's and—since little Sa'adut had resigned his claim—that of the next Heir to All Things or Nothingness; a coincidence which, by its hint of fatefulness, had kept interest keener than usual. Even Lateefa, beside his balloon-like bundle of the vanquished, was beginning to wonder if Aunt Khôjee had been true prophet, and Jehân's Creator meant to give him back his honour?

But at that rifle-shot, all else was forgotten and all crowded to the parapet.

'Back, sir! back!' shouted Jân-Ali-shân, roused beyond silence, as he grasped a fresh danger; and the crowd, recognising the new turn of affairs, broke silence also in a deep-toned murmur, on which a shriller sound rose sharply—the distant whistle of an engine. And Chris, as he dashed back to shelter, felt a faint quiver in the linked ribbon of steel beneath his feet.

'She's on the bridge, sir!' said Jân-Ali-shân—there was breathless hurry in his voice, but absolute certainty, as he felt hurriedly in his pocket for a match—'but we must wait a bit: if we looses off till the last minute, them Kusseyes'll swarm over. Oh! jes' wait till I gets a holt of them—sneakin' cold chisels won't be in this job!' He had the match lit, his watch out. ''Arf a minute gone, say, an' it takes a cool four minute on the bridge slowin' her off, an'

she'—he laid his hand on the lever crank of the hydraulic lift—'kin do it in fifty seconds; two and a 'arf left, say, for it won't do to miss the train this journey—but you look 'ere, sir—you give the time—creep round to the back and keep your h'eye on the distance-signal—when she falls sing out, and I 'll'—he clasped the crank tighter—'do Sandow! And,' he added to himself as Chris disappeared, 'you can talk your *ikbally* rot all you know, to-night, you can, you fools! for it won't come up to sample—no! it won't.'

Then, as if the reminiscence had brought another with it, he began softly on the song which he had sung that day on the bridge. The song of surplice-choir days. He had learned it with an organ accompaniment; and a sound was to be heard now, growing louder and louder, that like a deep organ note seemed to set the whole world a-quivering, even the very ground beneath his feet—a rumble and a roar, with a rhythmic pulse in it.

'They are trying to get a rope over,' shouted Chris. 'In two places—from the bastion as well.'

Jân-Ali-shân's hand left the crank for a second. He was out at the door looking, not citywards, but bridgewards. And then he laughed, laughed in the very face of a monstrous form with red eyes and a flaming mane coming steadily at him.

'They 'll 'ave to be nippier than they is general,' he called back, his hand once more waiting for its task, as he continued his song—

'Trees where you sit——
Shall crowd into a sha——a——a——'

The dainty little runs, mellow, perfect, paused when the wire connecting the distance-signal with the station thrilled like a fiddle-string as the signal fell, and Chris Davenant's 'Now!' followed sharply, but they went on again in the darkness, backed by that growing rumble and roar.

'Is it working? I can't hear the water! My God! if it isn't—what is to be done?'

The brown hand that had found a place on the crank also trembled against the white one.

'Do? We done our best, sir; an' she 's a lydy, so the odds is fair—

"aa—a—a—aa—a—
Trees whe—re you—sit, shall crowd into—o— a—shade."'

Done our best! The words, blending with the tender triumph of those final bars, were in Chris Davenant's ears but a few seconds, yet they brought a strange dreamy content with them, till Jân-Ali-shân, almost before the last note he had learned in his white-robed days ended, burst into a regular yell of relief, as the resistance on the crank lessened, ceased.

'She's down, or nigh it! Now for the fun, and the fightin', sir! Now to see them blamed Kusseyes!— —'

Clear of the clamour of confined sound in the little room, his voice rose in a laugh, as, to gain a standpoint on the wider ledge beyond the archway, he dashed, followed by Chris, right in front of the thundering engine, which was already so close, that the glare of its red eyes shone full on their reckless figures, as the scream of the danger-whistle rang out shrill and sharp.

Not in warning to them only. Not even to the crowd in front; *that* had parted, as it were, mechanically, leaving the steel-edged ribbon of rail in its midst, clear to the station. It was for the long links of carriages behind, out of which heads were already craning to catch the first glimpse of the fun and the fighting to which they had been summoned so hastily.

For there was danger ahead to every one behind. The girders of the drawbridge were still slightly aslant; they had barely closed into the sockets, and beside these a group of half-naked figures were busy.

Over what? Jân-Ali-shân guessed in a second that they were trying to prevent a further closing, they were trying to derail the train, and he was off like an arrow across the narrow bridge, hidden by the clouds of steam that rose in an instant from the curbed monster, as the brakes, the valves, were jammed home hard in the effort to stop it.

Chris could not understand the cry that came back through the steam—'Drop it, you devils! them's *my* cold chisels'; but, as ever, he followed on the other's heels, half-scalded, half-deafened; followed blindly until in the clearer air beyond—as yet!—that snorting, sliding, resistless fate behind him, he saw that the group about the sockets had scattered at the mere sight of that reckless onslaught.

All but one figure—the figure of the biggest bully of the butchers' gang, Jân-Ali-shân's sworn foe—that, with a yell of absolute hate, had run out as recklessly to bar the way.

Jân-Ali-shân gave a shout as he closed with it, for the man was a noted wrestler—'None o' yer buttin's an' booin's; fight *seeda*, or it ain't——'

There was no time for more words, since this was no place for a wrestling match—this narrow platform with the river below it, and scarcely room upon it for a man with steady nerves to stand slim and let a fierce shadow with a screaming voice pass in a roar and a rattle.

And such a fierce shadow half hidden in the steam fog was sliding on, battling against the curb, thundering, shaking the track with brakes down! So close! Dear God! so close!

Chris gave a desperate cry of fear and courage—but was beside those two.

And so was the red glare of the angry eyes seen through the steam clouds; so was the scream of the whistle heard above the roar and the rattle.

'Now then, sir, heave!

"*Yo-ho—yo-ho, ho! yo-ho, ho!*"'

The engine-driver, craning from his cab, heard so much beyond that fog of steam. The officers in the first carriage heard a brief—

'Keep your head, sir, and git a holt of me.'

Only those voices; no more. Then everything was lost in an awful grating sound—a sound of iron grinding iron to powder—a jerk, a wrench, a dislocation; a shock that shook the very air and made the very water in the river ebb and flow as the piers, the retaining-wall, quivered to their foundations.

But the next instant the rocking engine recovered its smooth slide, and the carriages were sliding after it over the girders it had jammed home—sliding on to the station, to safety, to the fun and the fighting!

And yet a yell of horror rose from the watching crowd. Not because the onward sliding which left the bridge free of steam clouds left it free also of all trace of those wrestling figures. That was only to be expected, since, if they had not fallen victims to the steam-devil, the water must have claimed them.

It was because the river was claiming something else, and the bastion, cracked so long, had yielded to its importunity at last—yielded perhaps to the shock, perhaps to that reck-

less rush of spectators to one side, perhaps to fate! And with a silence, awful in comparison with the clamour around it, it was sliding outwards, downwards. Sliding so slowly that it was well on its way ere an answering yell of terror rose from the figures upon it. Sliding so softly—brick holding fast to brick—that the final rending was almost unheard in the sound of hissing water closing in on water.

So, for an instant, nothing remained except two kites whirling distractedly at the swift downpull on their strings, until, giving up the battle, giving in to fate, they yielded the Sovereignty of Air and sank slowly into the river.

By this time, however, some of the claimants to that sovereignty had come to the surface again, shrieking for help, and reaching round for anything to support them.

Lateefa, luckily for him, found that bundle of the vanquished close to his hand, and managed with its help to get a grip upon a jag of wall. Luckily, for something had struck him on the back as he went down.

But there was no sign of Jehân or Burkut Ali; no sign even of those other two whom the river had claimed.

And none came to seek for one; for none knew rightly what had happened or who the bridge-savers had been, save the bridge-wreckers, and they had fled. Most of the crowd, therefore, drifted back to the station or the city. The station that was full of the rattle of rifles being shouldered, of the tramp of feet falling into line.

'How on earth you got here so soon, I can't think,' said a police-officer who had ridden up in hot haste at the news of some disturbance on the bathing-steps. 'The up-mail? By Jove! what luck! It will settle the whole "biz," I expect.'

And in the city voices were saying much the same thing.

If the troops were there, ready for the first sign, what was the use of making it? Let the rabble rise if they chose. Let fools commit themselves. Wise men would wait a better opportunity.

CHAPTER XXV

SECRET DESPATCHES

NUSHAPORE, however, was not all wise; very far from it. Out of its two hundred and odd thousand souls, there were some to whom the possibility of disturbances meant a long-looked-for opportunity of indulging—with comparative safety—in criminal habits. And there were many also, who, without any special desire for evil, regretted the diminishing chance of a night's excitement and amusement.

At first some of these found solace in the catastrophe at the kite-flyers' bastion; though, after a time, this proved to be less disastrous than might have been expected, for, out of all those who were known to have been on the building, only two or three were even injured. Jehân Aziz, it is true, had disappeared, but even in the first knowledge of this, the fact brought scarcely a word of regret—especially in the Royal Family. It felt vaguely that it stood a better chance without him, even though the next heir was not close enough to that dead dynasty to hope for the practical recognition of an increased pension from Government!

Neither did the sight of Burkut Ali being carried off to hospital on a stretcher distress it much. But it had a word or two of encouragement and sympathy for Lateefa who, still clinging to his kites, refused all help as he sat propped against a wall waiting for the numbness to pass from his legs—as it must pass, since he had no pain.

Of Jân-Ali-shân and Chris no one thought on that side of the bridge; for the simple reason that the disaster to the bastion absorbed all tongues for a time, and, in addition, beyond the fact that there had been some fighting for the bridge, no one knew anything.

In the station, also, there was no one to explain what had happened. The *baboo*, who might have told what he knew,

had, in that interval of suspense, discreetly fled to his lodgings in the city, where he was trying to concoct *alibis*.

It was only on the bathing-steps that anything definite was known, and there a curious consternation had followed immediately on the rapid raid made by those two through the temple. For, when the brief tumult of resistance had passed with their passage, the only trace of it that remained was fateful, beyond words, to the superstitious eyes which saw it.

Swâmi Viseshwar Nâth, the high priest of Shiv-*jee*, lay with crushed skull on *Mai* Kâli's very lap! His blood was pouring out upon her altar; yet, despite the blow which all had seen, despite the crash which all had heard, not one of her many widespread arms was injured!

Here was a miracle indeed! For what had been her words on that golden paper which she had flung, in defiance as it were, into the temple of her rival?

'*Yea! though they smite me, there shall be Blood upon Mine Altar.*'

And there was. The blood of the arch-detractor of Her Supremacy.

A miracle indeed! to be affirmed or denied to the exclusion of all other thoughts.

And so, on those wide steps leading down to the river, the newcomers, hastening thither at vague rumours of strange doings—stranger even than fixed bayonets at the city gates—were caught in the conflict of opinions and held captive by the question—

'Would *Mai* Kâli stay the plague now, as She had promised to do when there was blood upon Her altars, or would She not?'

In other words, dare men—mere men—take the remedy into their own hands, and risk offending the Great Goddess by lack of faith?

Would it not be better to wait a bit and see what happened? So, coming and going on the steps—coming in fierce haste, going in awestruck doubt—men asked themselves if their part was to wait and watch. But, inside the temple, two poor souls crouched in a corner knew what their part as women must be; and therefore, after a time of fruitless waiting, they stole out hand-in-hand and went back to the city, back to their empty house, realising but

one thing: that the stray sheep which had been lost and found, had gone astray once more; had defied the priests, perhaps killed his *guru*.

And they had left that house empty with such joy, believing they were to bring their dear one back to it! And now, to whom were they to go for advice; for weddings and burials—since such things must be—if Viseshwar Nâth was dead? Viseshwar who had known all things concerning the family? So they wept, not knowing that his death made future happiness for one of them possible.

The city itself was by this time like a hive of bees about to swarm, which is disturbed by a finger-touch. People hurried hither and thither causelessly; excited, anxious, yet harmless; for those who had meant to give the cue for action hung back at the sight of the soldiers. Yet many of these would-be mischief-makers had not quite given up hope, and their unwillingness to do so, strangely enough, was in inverse ratio to their hope of achieving any good by raising a riot. For, while every minute that passed showed the more reasonable, the more interested, that wisdom lay in postponement, those who had very little stake or thought in the matter beyond a general desire to kick over the traces, grew more and more desperate as the opportunity for this seemed to be slipping from them. Govind the editor was one of these, and, gravitating naturally to his like, found himself after a time in one of the bands of discontents who were ready for any trivial mischief that might come handy. But as yet, even these had no objective.

And so, after all, Jack Raymond had time for a late dinner. And he ate a good one too, in ignorance—like every one else except a few of the would-be train-wreckers who discreetly held their tongues—of the real history of the drawbridge. For the steam fog had effectually hidden all the heroism of that struggle for it. Had hidden all things save the voices in the fog; save that almost incredible chanting of a sailor's chorus heard by the engine-driver, those few words, 'Keep your head, sir, and take a holt of me,' half-heard by some of the officers.

And Sir George Arbuthnot, too, ate his dinner at the club. He did not make so good a one, however; and when he had finished it, hurriedly, he paused beside the table where Jack Raymond was finishing his, leisurely, to say

with rather elaborate point, 'So you were right after all, Mr. Raymond!—and—and I was wrong—should, I expect, have been still more wrong, if Kenyon here had not insisted on telegraphing to Fareedabad.' He looked as he spoke at the Commissioner, who had come in for a mere bite and sup.

Jack Raymond rose, feeling that he liked the man better than he had ever done before; feeling for the first time that he was glad he had helped.

'I don't know, sir,' he said cheerfully, 'about the right and the wrong. I happened to hear. But it was uncommonly lucky the troops managed to nick the up-mail, or they might have been a bit late. It must have been a near shave!'

'Very!' put in the Commissioner with a slightly puzzled frown. 'I don't know exactly how the deuce they did it, but that's a detail for the present. Now, sir, if you will write that note to relieve Lady Arbuthnot's anxiety, we can start back to the hospital—though really there is no necessity for it—the danger is over.'

Jack Raymond shook his head. 'Not till daylight—it never is. I don't mean for the hospital. If nothing happens at midnight, nothing will; but there are lots of other games—at least I should fancy so,' he added as he sat down again, resuming his dinner and his indifference.

'That is one of the most able men in India!' remarked the Commissioner to Sir George; 'it is a thousand pities he allowed——'

And then, hurriedly, he changed the subject. It would have been less significant if he had not done so, and Sir George felt inclined to ask him to finish the sentence. But even that defiance would have been significant in its turn, so he gave in resignedly to the awkwardness of the situation—for he could not help feeling it was awkward—and sat down to write his note to Grace before returning to the city.

She had been hoping for some message all the evening, and Lesley realised how great a strain the waiting for news had been on Lady Arbuthnot's nerves when she saw the sudden relief the note brought with it.

Till then the Sunday dinner-party had been unusually dull. Now, just as people were beginning to wonder if they had not ordered their carriage to come a trifle late, a new

life seemed to spring up. The hostess herself started music by going to the piano, and as she did so, she found time for a whisper to Lesley—'It's all right! The troops caught the up-mail and came back in it—sharp work, wasn't it? and George says everything is settling down, but I am not to expect him home till one or two. Oh! I feel so happy!'

She looked it, and—good singer as she was—she sang as few had ever heard her sing. Lesley for one, who listened to the quaint little French *chansons*, half-laughter half-tears, and the pretty, comic-opera trills and runs with a new perception of the woman who sang them—the woman who was, as a rule, so unlike most of her sex in her calm intelligence.

And now? Now every man in the room was crowding round the piano. She was holding them there by something that was not beauty or intelligence, not by her looks or her singing, but by the woman's desire to have and hold the admiration of her world by making it depend on her for pleasure—the desire which made Eve share her apple with Adam!

Yes! that was it! The woman's desire to have and to hold for herself alone.

But while the dinner-party at Government House had taken a fresh lease of life under Grace Arbuthnot's guidance, there was another dinner-party going on in Nushapore, where the good wine of high spirits had come first and the ditch-water of dulness last. This was at Mr. Lucanaster's; and it had been the probability of being late for this—a supreme effort on his part towards something pre-eminently jolly—which had made him sulky at being delayed by the 'memorable occasion.' For, to begin with, more time would be required for dressing than usual, since the party was to be a *réchauffé* of the Mutiny Lancers. It was to be a Mutiny dinner; and for the first time Mrs. Chris had consented to act as hostess and sit at the top of Mr. Lucanaster's table; Mrs. Chris in that bewildering costume of pink roses and white shoulders.

And everything had been perfect. The dinner worthy of a *chef*, the champagne iced enough to cool the tongue, not enough to lessen its sparkle. And yet, at eleven o'clock, the guests were beginning to leave. At half-past, Mrs. Chris —there was no mistake in her costume either—was eyeing

Mr. Lucanaster with the amused superiority to the trivialities of sentiment or passion which—as she had always told poor Chris—made her absolutely capable of taking care of herself in any situation.

'No, thanks! I don't want another cigarette, and I'd rather not have a cherry-brandy before I go back; but you can tell the bearer to tell my *ayah* to bring my cloak and overshoes in here. I told her to come and wait.'

Mr. Lucanaster swore under his breath.

'Oh! I don't think it was quite so bad as that,' she continued cheerfully, ignoring the palpable cause of his annoyance. 'It really was quite jolly at first, and nothing could have been better done. It was that little fool Jones with his cock-and-bull story of a row in the city; and then the dresses, you know, made one a bit shivery, thinking of the Mutiny. It did—even me—and I'm not that sort. But you couldn't help that, you know—your part of it was perfect.'

He looked at her grimly, his determination not to be played with in this fashion growing.

'Not quite!' he answered. 'There was yet one thing lacking; one thing that I had meant to have secured—only I could not—you were so late in coming.'

'I?' she asked curiously. 'Was it something to do with me, then?'

'With the perfection of your dress—it needs something!'

She coloured up pink as her roses, and gave a hurried glance at a mirror opposite. 'I do not see it,' she said angrily.

'Yes, you do!' he persisted, looking in the mirror also. 'There is something wanted *here*.' He pointed to her white throat, and in the mirror his hand pointed to it also.

'Ah'h,' she sighed thoughtfully.—'Yes! pearls—but I had no real ones. And—and I can stand paste—but somehow sham pearls——!'

'No! not pearls! No! never! Not milk-and-water pearls!' he protested. 'Not with roses there'—he pointed to the glistening shoulders—'and roses there'—the hand in the mirror seemed almost to touch the glistening hair.—'It should be roses here. And—and I had some pink topazes—a bagatelle—you might have bought them from me if you would not take them as a gift. Bah! a trifle!—just drops of pink dew hanging from a fine gold chain——'

Her hard blue eyes grew covetous; she drew in her breath. 'Drops of pink dew hanging from a fine gold chain!—How—how perfectly delicious! And cheap too—oh! do let me see them.'

'Why not, madame? Are they not in my office room; but'—he looked at her and laughed—'will you not smoke *one* cigarette while you inspect them?'

She looked at him sharply in her turn, then laughed too. He had been clever! She rather admired him for it; though, if he thought he had gained any advantage, he was mistaken.

'Why not, monsieur?' she answered, coolly helping herself from the box. 'As I have to see the topazes, I may as well smoke while you are fetching them.'

She threw herself into an arm-chair and nodded at him. But when the pink topazes came, as they did come to her, after a minute or two, she stood up again in the intensity of her admiration. There were other jewels in the quaint little Indian casket which, with an ill grace, he had brought back with him from the office;—among them a string of remarkably fine pearls—but she never even looked at them. The topaz dewdrops absorbed her. He had been right! They were the one thing wanting.

The only question that remained was, briefly, how much she could afford to give for them.

As she stood calculating, as only women of her type can calculate, Mr. Lucanaster watched her with an easy smile, thinking what a curious hold little stones—which to him only meant so much money—had upon humanity. There was a ruby, for instance, in that very casket, which had taken him three years to wile away from a minor member of the Royal Family. Then there was the emerald— — —

A sudden sound of distant voices echoed through the stillness of the night, and Mrs. Chris looked up from the pink dew, startled.

'I wonder what that is?' she said, pausing. 'I wish that man Jones hadn't told his foolish tales. He has made me nervous, quite nervous.'

Mr. Lucanaster moved a step nearer. 'You needn't be afraid with me, Jenny,' he said, attempting sentiment, 'even if there was——'

He got no further, for the figure of a very old native, withered, bent, dressed (or undressed) in the nondescript garb

of a scullion, showed at the door, then advanced with furtive haste and equally furtive importance.

'*Khodawund!*' it said toothlessly and with joined hands. 'It is about to come again. This slave saw it then—in '57. He was *khânsâman* then to Ricketts-*sahib bahadur*, who was killed——'

'Curse you!' shouted Mr. Lucanaster, 'what the devil——?' Then, as the simplest way of getting at the truth, he ran into the verandah. Every servant had disappeared; but there was no mistaking the sound that came clearer now—it was the sound of a crowd, an angry crowd! He stood irresolute for a moment, and then, along the road that lay between his house and Chris Davenant's, he saw two men running with torches.

'There is thatch to both,' called one. 'We will take *his* first—he who spoilt our plan. The others will settle the depraver of Kings' Houses!'

That was enough! He was back in the house in a second, but not in the drawing-room. In his office, at the safe which he had left open!

Meanwhile Viva, alone with the furtive haste and furtive importance which had seen it all before, stood paralysed with terror; stood in that dress of the year of grace 1857, feeling as if that past had claimed her.

But it *had* claimed the old anatomy who had returned, in his old age, to the first rung of the ladder whence he had climbed to that dignity of '*khânsâman* to Ricketts-*sahib bahadur* who was killed.'

They had come back to him, those days of livery and gold lace when he had served a lady, dressed perhaps in pink tarlatan! They had come back, and the furtiveness left the remnant that remained of that dignity; the importance returned. 'But the *mem* was not killed, *Huzoor*! How should it be so when Mohubbut Khân was there? Quick! follow me, *Huzoor*! This slave knows where safety lies! Has he not seen it all before? Quick, *Huzoor*, quick! The *mem-sahiba* is safe—quite safe if she follows Mohubbut Khân.'

Safe, quite safe! Those words were enough for this woman in her pink tarlatan, whose nerves, such as they were, had been juggled with by that same pink tarlatan! She forgot everything else, even the pink dewdrops!

The next instant she was out—as many a *mem-sahiba* had been out in that fateful May-time more than forty years before—with no guide to safety but a native servant. And this was no servant of hers, bound to her by the slender tie—slender in the West, at any rate!—of personal service. Mohubbut Khân was only servant of that past—the past which had brought him nothing for his old age save a return to the greasy swab and miserable pittance of his apprenticeship to service!

Yet as, with a breathlessness that had not been in that midnight flight of forty years ago, he headed straight as a die for the Garden Mound, he prattled cheerfully of the future as he might have done then.

Let the *mem-sahiba* stay herself on the Merciful and Clement, including, of course, His servant Mohubbut! As for the master, the *âkâ-sahib*, who, perforce, had to think of more than mere safety, the Merciful and Clement had him in his keeping also. And though Mohubbut could not, unfortunately, be in two places at once, some other slave would doubtless be raised up!

There was no fear; none! Was not Jân-Ali-shân-*sahib*—he pointed into the night—there to be reckoned with still? And had it been possible during that nine long months for any black face—even Mohubbut's, which had remained outside after he had put the *mem* inside—to win in to the Garden Mound?

So, hovering between past and present, the old man who had been '*khânsâman* to Ricketts-*sahib bahadur* who was killed,' chattered of safety—— —— ——

Until the Garden Mound was reached, and then——

Then he stood in the dim moonlight—helpless—bewildered—importance gone! For where was safety, where was Jân-Ali-shân?

Ruins, and flowers! Only one thing as it had been forty years before.

The English flag!

He headed straight for it comforted, the importance returning. 'The *mem-sahiba* need have no fear,' he muttered glibly; 'was not Mohubbut *khânsâman* to Ricketts-*sahib bahadur* who was killed?—but the *mem* was not. Ah! no!'

Yet, once more, the wide ruined doorways of the Residency upset the unstable balance of the half-crazy old man's con-

fidence. But only for a moment. The next, he had lost even importance in quick decision, as the sound of running footsteps, of men's voices, rose against the background of faint elusive cries and distant disturbance which had been with them, fitfully, in their flight.

'Quick, *Huzoor*, quick! they come! Have no fear! The *mem* was never killed! yet they came before!'

And Viva, tarlatan in ribbons, almost fainting with fear, followed blindly; then sank behind a heap of stones that lay—part of a ruined stair—in the lowest story of the turret.

Only just in time; for the voices were close at hand, the steps upon the outside stair that led to the roof.

'Lo! we can do so much, if naught else,' came savagely: 'we can end their boast, brothers!' The voice was an educated one, and there was some answering laughs, as five or six white figures passed upwards.

'Have no fear, *mem-sahiba*!' whispered the toothless comforter. 'Jân-Ali-shân will settle *them*.'

Apparently he did; or some one else carrying on the tradition of the dead man who lay in the Hollow of Heroes; for almost ere the last climber could have reached the top, they were down the narrow stairs again helter-skelter.

'Trra!' said one vexedly. 'To think they should not have forgotten that! Truly, it is ill doing aught against them, and they so wise! Let us go back to the city—there be plenty of fools there.'

'Said I not so?' whispered the toothless comforter triumphantly, as the steps died away. 'He hath sent them forth discomfited. It was even so before, when Mohubbut was *khânsâman* to Ricketts-*sahib* who was killed—but the *mem* was not.'

Mrs. Chris, however, was past comfort. Had they come back again she would not have stirred; and she sat in the darkness behind the heap of stones, shuddering and sobbing, too terrified even to hear that monotonous refrain—'Have no fear! Have no fear!'

They are idle words when the heart is full of forebodings. Grace Arbuthnot was finding them so but a few hundred yards away, though she stood calmly saying them to herself.

'There can be no fear!' she said. 'Why should they do him an injury?'

'Why, indeed?' echoed Sir George with an inward groan, born of wider experience of what men can do in such times as these; 'but what *can* have become of the child?'

He had returned home but a few moments before—and far later than he had anticipated, owing to a raid which had been made on Chris Davenant's and Mr. Lucanaster's bungalows, which had ended in the burning of both—to find the whole household distracted.

For Jerry had disappeared; he was not to be found anywhere, neither was his Mohammedan *chuprassi*, nor his Hindoo bearer; both men who worshipped the child, who would to all appearance have given their lives for him.

For an instant Sir George's face had cleared at this information; but it had clouded again at the utter incomprehensibility of the whole affair. Lesley had put the child to bed before she had gone out on her cycle. He had then been quite happy, and was to play with his soldiers on 'The Land of Counterpane' till he felt sleepy. That was the last that had been seen of him. Needham, the maid, who worked in the next room, had heard no disturbance. She had been in and out of other rooms, naturally, but not for long. Grace had given a look in about eight o'clock, had seen the night-light burning as usual—a little dimmer, perhaps—and, Jerry not having called to her, she had not risked disturbing him. Then had come the dinner-party. People had stayed late; and after they had gone she and Lesley had sat up talking, expecting every instant to hear Sir George return;—growing a little anxious as time went on, until, about half an hour ago, Captain Lloyd—who had gone off after the guests had left to see what news he could pick up—had come back with such good accounts, that Grace had sent Lesley to her bed.

Then, not till then, the child's absence was discovered. How long he had been absent, none could tell, for the only two servants likely to know, the two who never left him day or night, were gone also.

They had hunted everywhere: Nevill Lloyd had run back to the club to give the alarm to the men he had left there a few minutes before, Grace had made every inquiry of the other servants; but, she suggested, perhaps a man accustomed to cross-examining native witnesses might get at some clue—

'There is nothing else to be done for the moment,' assented Sir George briefly. 'You had better leave me to do it.

Grace—if you are here, they will be remembering what they said *to you.*'

So Lesley and Grace—the latter still repeating those words: 'There can be no fear! Who would hurt the child? Why should they choose him, of all others?'—went and waited in the verandah overlooking the Garden Mound, for the first hint of Nevill Lloyd's return. And yet, while Grace said the words, she was conscious that there might be a reason. If some one wanted to force their hand about that unlucky letter—the letter that now meant the worst, since the troops *had* been sent for, the promise of no coercion broken at the very beginning; unavoidably of course, yet none the less disastrously, if that letter became public property.

And Lesley's mind, also, was not without its sting of remorse added to its anxiety, as she stood in the fast-lightening dawn looking out into the dim shadows for hint or sign. Ought she to have told Grace why her cycle ride had been so long? Yet *that* made no difference to *this*, and a knowledge of the truth would only take from Grace a belief that had made her glad.

No! she could not tell her now! She would wait till Jerry returned—if he did return!

Oh! what could have become of the child?

'Jerry! Jerry!' she called almost involuntarily, and with the cry came back a memory of that midnight chase after the boy.

And with that, came the thought of Jack Raymond and his warning—'He takes it too hard, dear little chap.' She laid her hand quickly on Grace Arbuthnot's wrist. 'I believe I know!' she said, starting to run. 'Come! Let us find Budlu first.'

But she was too late; as they rounded the carriage-drive, and saw on the grey sky of dawn above the bosoming trees the flagstaff with its drooping flag ready to welcome the sun as ever, there was a sound of voices, of laughter, from the ruins. And the next moment Nevill Lloyd, catching sight of them, was tearing across the lawns to meet them, shouting as he ran—

'It's all right, Lady Arbuthnot! Raymond ran the little beggar to earth in five minutes. He was up on the top of the tower with his *chuprassi*, his bearer, and Budlu the

caretaker, and the young imp had got my whole sporting-magazine too! By Jove! if I'd only known *that*, I might have guessed—but Raymond did——'

Grace, who had pulled up, felt the relief almost worse than the suspense; yet she kept calm.

'Lesley!' she said, 'run back and tell Sir George.'

'Let me!' cried Nevill Lloyd. 'Or stay! I'd better go and stop the search-parties.'

So, with light hearts and feet, they left Grace alone to meet the little procession that was coming across the dim lawns. Rather a crestfallen little procession—Jerry, full of yawns and but half awake, led by Jack Raymond, and followed by guilty figures carrying the sporting magazine.

'He is very sorry to have made you so anxious,' said Jack Raymond, grave with difficulty, 'but I have promised you won't scold him, because he meant well. He thought it was a mutiny, and he went to guard the flag.'

'And I did guard it!' put in Jerry aggrievedly, 'afore I went to sleep. For they comed to pull it down—didn't they?' He turned sharply to his henchmen.

'*Huzoor!*' they assented eagerly, seeing extenuation in the plea, 'without doubt they came.'

'They may have!' said Jack Raymond aside, 'I haven't had time to find out yet. He was asleep when I came, with the key of the door in his hand; and they were positively afraid to take it from him till I insisted!'

'He is more than half-asleep now, poor child,' replied Grace in the same tone, struggling with her desire to laugh, and cry, and hug Jerry all at once. 'Bearer, you had better take the *chota-sahib* back to his bed, and I will inquire about the rest by and by. Good-night, Jerry! or rather good-morning! You gave poor mum such a fright!'

'I'm solly,' murmured Jerry sleepily, shrinking as ever from the passionate caress she could not help giving, 'but they weally did come—didn't they?'

'*Huzoor!* without doubt they came!' echoed the trio forlornly.

'And I wouldn't be hard on them either,' said Jack Raymond, as the disconsolate little group moved homewards. 'I fancy they must have had some inkling of the city business, and then, when he started this game, they were in two minds if he wasn't right. You were all away, you see. And

Master Jerry was completely master of the situation, I can tell you. He must have been thinking about it for some time, for he had provisions—chocolate caramels, and heaven knows what!—stored in the crevices—dear little chap! And that reminds me'—he paused with a laugh, and drew an official envelope sealed with a red seal out of his pocket—'here's his "Secret Despatches." They fell out of Lloyd's cartridge-case he was wearing, as he came down-stairs—he was so dead sleepy he could hardly stand—and I promised to hand them over to you. He has had them, he told me, these two months! and they are most important.'

Grace Arbuthnot took the envelope, gave a glance at it, a cry, certain, yet incredulous—

'It is my letter—*the* letter—how could he have found it!'

There was a pause as those two stood, in the dawn of another day, with that immemorial past about them, looking at each other almost doubtfully.

'There are more things in heaven and earth,' said the man at last. 'And so Jerry really has—hullo, what's up now? What do *you* want?'

'*Khodawund!*' replied the furtive importance, which was all that remained of the '*khânsâman* to Ricketts-*sahib bahadur* who was killed,' as it salaamed low to the masters. 'There is a *mem* yonder in the Residency, whom I, Mohubbut, brought thither as I brought the other, into the keeping of Jân-Ali-shân. And he hath kept her! Yea! during the night when the evil-doers came, he kept her safe as he did of old. But now it is dawn, and though I tell the *mem* it is safety, she listens not; but if the *Huzoors* come, she will believe.'

'During the night!' commented Jack Raymond swiftly, as, scarcely able to believe their ears, those two followed the old man's lead. 'Then it is true—Jerry has—has kept the flag!'

CHAPTER XXVI

FAIR ODDS

THE pendulum of India is a heavy one; it soon returns to its normal arc; and so, after a very few days, nothing remained to show that any force had sent it beyond its usual swing in Nushapore except the charred ruins of two bungalows; and they, being in Shark Lane, were not so much *en evidence* as they would have been elsewhere.

So far, even, as personal disturbance to the owners was concerned, the sum-total of effect was small; for Chris Davenant had not returned to hear of his loss, and Mrs. Chris, after the terrors of that night, when she had become part of the old half-crazy *khânsâman's* memory of the past, seemed glad to be rid of any tie to India. Indeed, as the faces around her became graver when no tidings came of her husband, and the impression grew that he and Jân-Ali-shân had, in some mysterious way, been mixed up in the attempt to wreck the train, and the fall of the bastion, she seemed almost relieved. Her one desire was to escape from a place where such terror was possible; to return to London, to its ways and works. To the red Hammersmith 'bus that runs to Kew on Sundays; to the baker, the butcher, and the little greengrocer round the corner. And when she wept, it was chiefly because—having no worldly goods beyond a torn and tattered pink tarlatan—she could not engage her passage home, until a sufficient subscription was raised to pay for it. And she had not many friends.

So far as the one bungalow, therefore, was concerned, there were few regrets. On the other hand, Mr. Lucanaster's were distinctly above the average. He had not only been burned out of house and home, but of other more valuable things; since, almost before he had had time to consider how best to ensure their safety, an inrush of voices and steps in the verandah had made him think of that most valuable of all

possessions—his life—and leave the rest—even the woman in the next room!

And as if this was not bad enough, something else had occurred which had reduced him to helpless impotent cursing and swearing against Fate, Jehân Aziz, Mrs. Chris Davenant, and everything that had conspired to bring about such incredible ill-luck.

And yet it was a very simple thing, almost ludicrously so.

The very day after the rioting, when all Nushapore was being searched for evidence, the police with great pride had brought him back the casket which had been left open on the table with the pink dewdrops beside it, when Mrs. Chris fled with the *khânsâman* of Rickett-*sahib bahadur* (who was killed). It was now closed, and had been discovered, they said, in the house of one Govind, who had been arrested on suspicion. And he, to screen himself doubtless from worse accusations, had stated that he had found it flung away on the road not far from the blazing bungalow. Therefore, since it was evidently a jewel casket, it was most likely part of the *Huzoor*'s lost property; and if so, he could detail its contents and open the spring-lock with his key, in order that the description might be duly verified and the necessary forms filled up.

For one brief second Mr. Lucanaster had returned thanks to such gods as he possessed for this small mercy. Here was something saved from the general *débâcle*; to begin with, a very valuable ruby—and——

And then had come the horrid recollection of a certain string of pearls which could not be claimed.

It had nearly killed him to deny the ownership of the casket; but he had denied it. There was literally nothing else to be done, with that spring-lock and the key in his possession.

So when the police took it away in order to find the rightful owner, he had gone into his room at the hotel—it was next the one to which Mrs. Chris had been taken—and shaken his fist at her through the wall, and sworn horribly not only at his own loss, but at the gain of others, which, with his experience in jewel-jobbing, he knew would follow.

And it did; for no sooner was the casket filed open by the police and its contents made known by a list, than owners began to crop up—crowds of them.

But it was when an assistant police-officer at the club, thinking to rouse him from his general despondency by putting him on the track of a good thing, mentioned that there had been a ruby in the casket which he really ought to get hold of; a ruby that had been claimed, on irrefragable evidence, as an heirloom by a peculiarly impecunious member of the Royal Family, from whom he could no doubt get it cheap without much trouble—it was then that Mr. Lucanaster had fled from his fellows, and actually wept to think that after three years' hard scheming he had bought that ruby at something like its real value.

That had been the worst blow; but there had been similar ones, and quite a large number of the pensioners invested in new cocks and quails and went about with cheerful countenances.

Another result was that Grace Arbuthnot, as she stood one day re-threading the four pearls which Sobrai Begum had brought to Miss Leezie's house on to the string that had been found in the casket, declared that it was just like the last chapter in a novel. Everything was clearing itself up—her face certainly warranted the remark—and rounding itself off neatly for the end. She thought, as she spoke, of the lost letter, the recovery of which, as Jerry's 'Secret Despatches,' had seemed so mysterious, until the child had told her quite simply that he had found the envelope in a bush in the garden—flung away most likely by the thief as valueless—and had kept it to play with, because some one 'must have hidden it, you know, an' didn't want people to wead it, so it was secwet.'

But she did not speak of this; she only said that she had never expected to see her pearls again, yet here they were, with only one a-missing—her dear old pearls! She held them up to her white throat and smiled, thinking of the many happy hours she had spent with their touch upon her.

If any one had told her that that was the first time they *had* touched a slender white throat, and that the last time a woman had worn them, they had been snatched from a slender brown one and flung in the dust from scorn of the hours they had brought to a bride, she would not have believed it.

Not her pearls! Whose else could they be? Had not even Mr. Lucanaster given his opinion on them as an expert? for even that agony had not been spared to the unfortunate man.

'Yes,' answered Sir George, who had stopped his writing to admire his wife and think how happy and handsome she looked, and how glad he was for her sake that the strain and anxiety was over, as it seemed to be, 'it is rather curious how everything is falling into line. It is always the "first step" in India, of course, and so it was only to be expected that things would settle into march time after a bit. But Jehân Aziz's death and this finding of the pearls has disposed of that story, for Burkut Ali, the doctors say, isn't likely to live, and the girl is certainly a thief, whatever else she may be. And it disposes of the pestilent fellow who wrote that threatening letter also.' He paused. 'Then Kenyon was only telling me this morning what an extraordinary quieting effect that incident in *Mai* Kâli's temple has had. Of course, we haven't got to the bottom of it quite. No one will give evidence, because of the miracle; but the fact remains that the prophecy was fulfilled.'

'Then there is the bridge business,' said Grace thoughtfully. 'Has anything new cropped up?'

Sir George shook his head, then frowned. 'Not about that, beyond the fact that the engine-driver is quite certain he heard singing, and that of course points to the loafer Ellison; and as he was Davenant's foreman of works, the two were likely to be together. But—but,' he frowned again, and let his hand busy itself impatiently with a pile of papers, 'there is something else. You know, we wondered how the troops got here so soon. Well, there is something odd about the telegram. Times don't tally, and it seems another telegram was sent direct to the station to detain the up-mail, pending orders. It came in—"urgent"—just as the train was in, and the station-master—he is a native—got flurried and sent up, with the telegram we know about—at least I suppose so—to cantonments for further orders, when, of course, the commandant jumped at the chance. And now the station-master can't find the wire, isn't sure if it ever was written out, as he was in the telegraph-office at the time waiting for the up-signals. And there is no trace of it this end. Nothing but the telegraph-form I gave Kenyon to fill in, and which he sent to the railway-office. But there, again, the time doesn't tally with Kenyon's recollections, and though the order is identical the wording is slightly different, for he put in something about stopping the night-mail, which isn't

in the wire the commandant received. That part seems to have been made into a separate order and construed into the up-mail. But that may be due to the *baboos*; a couple of greater fools never were. They seem to know nothing; especially the one here. Kenyon says the clocks may have been wrong; but I can't help wondering. Davenant seems to have known something, and he was seen at his works after dusk; if he had been another sort of fellow—but it is impossible! There isn't one Englishman in a thousand, let alone a native, who would take such a responsibility. I wouldn't, and I don't know any one who would; at any rate who would, and then keep quiet when it was successful—for it was! It made all the difference: as I've told Kenyon, he has the entire credit; but for him we should have had a row.'

'But if you hadn't given him the telegram——'

Sir George shook his head in honest obstinacy. 'I never meant it to be used; I didn't believe in the danger. As I told Mr. Raymond, he was right, and I was wrong; so that is an end of it, my dear.'

He seemed quite satisfied, especially when his wife stooped suddenly, and kissed the top of his head; though he wondered, as she left the room, if he was really getting a little bald! not so much because her lips had thrilled him, but because he was observant enough to have noticed that a partially bald head is provocative of wifely kissing. Still, even that evil had to be faced in the cause of empire, and so the honest gentleman took up his pen and continued the report of recent affairs which he was writing, and in which the credit of saving the situation was given unstintingly not to himself, but to others; for Sir George was a gentleman.

Grace, however, though she was a lady, and despite that kiss of approval, felt a trifle annoyed. It was very nice of George to minimise his part in the business; yet when all was said and done, he *had* consented to give the order—consented almost in defiance of the official programme. The more she thought of it, the more aggrieved she felt for him; and so, when she found Lesley alone in the school-room, she sought her sympathy, explained the whole position at great length, and wound up by the appeal—

'Now, do you see what right Mr. Kenyon has to all the credit?'

Lesley had so far managed to keep a calm sough without much difficulty; at the present moment, however, something seemed wrong with her work, for she was very busy with it at the window.

'No!' she said at last, 'I don't!' and then she repeated the remark with palpable resentment: 'Certainly not! He had nothing to do with it—nothing at all.'

Grace looked in her direction with dubious curiosity.

'You don't mean, do you,' she asked, 'that you think any one else——'

'I don't think anything at all,' interrupted the girl hurriedly. 'I only say that Mr. Kenyon didn't—I mean that he isn't the right person to praise.'

But Lady Arbuthnot was not to be put off. 'Because that really is quite absurd, as I told George. And he admitted that he did not know of any one—not a single man who would have taken such a grave responsibility. Now do you? Tell the truth, Lesley! do you know any one?'

'Perhaps there was more than a single man,' suggested Lesley evasively, the knot in her thread becoming extremely troublesome.

Grace, from her chair, gave an irritated glance towards the window. 'My dear Lesley! you are not often so—so precise! As if it mattered to my argument if there were one or two! I wish you would leave off threading your needle, or whatever it is, and come here and be a little sympathetic. It means so much to *me*, you know—so, if you wish it, we will say two! Do you know of any two people who could and would do such a thing?'

Lesley folded up her work with great method, but remained where she was.

'Why should we complicate matters by saying two?' she asked pugnaciously. 'And after all, it wasn't—I mean it would not be such a very big thing. There must be lots of people in the world who could do it. Just think! even among the men one knows.'

'People who could, and would!' echoed Grace in the same tone. 'No! I don't know any one!' She paused, and added a trifle bitterly: 'I know one, who *could*; but then he wouldn't!—Mr. Raymond.'

'Mr. Raymond! Why should you say he wouldn't?' asked the girl swiftly. 'Why——?'

'You needn't be so fierce, Lesley!' interrupted Grace, with a little hard laugh, 'though you don't think him half bad. For many reasons! No—he wouldn't help—us—in a thing like that—not he!'

'That isn't fair,' cried Lesley in a flame. 'If you knew——' She paused, but was too late.

'If I knew what?' asked Lady Arbuthnot, rising and coming to the window; then standing before the girl, to say, after a pause: 'You will have to tell me, you know, Lesley; you have started me, and I'm not a fool. And of course I know—Jerry told me—that Mr. Raymond had come to cycle with you that evening—that *that* was why you were so late; but I said nothing, because I thought it was only——'

'I don't care what you thought,' interrupted Lesley angrily; 'and I won't tell you anything unless you promise not to speak——'

'I will promise not to tell any one who ought not to know that I know,' put in Grace Arbuthnot proudly. 'I won't promise more——'

'And who wants more?' cried the girl hotly. 'Of course, if people ought to know, they must know. That is the only reason why I'm telling you. I didn't mean to, but if you can be so—so unjust, it is only right that you should know the truth.'

'I can judge of that for myself when you have told me, so you needn't waste time,' retorted Grace.

A sudden antagonism had sprung up between the two women of which they were both aware, of which they were both vaguely ashamed, but which they could not ignore.

'Thank you!' said Grace, with chill dignity when the recital was over. 'You were right to tell me. I will apologise to Mr. Raymond.'

'To Mr. Raymond!' echoed Lesley, carried beyond her resentment by eagerness. 'No! Lady Arbuthnot—not to him. He is not one of the people who ought to know that you know!'

'May I ask why?'

For an instant it seemed as if Lesley would have matched Grace in resentment, and then suddenly she held out her hands in swift appeal.

'Oh! don't be angry, please! but surely after what happened between you—I cant help knowing that, can I?—you owe

Mr. Raymond something—you ought to let him have this—this revenge to himself—just to take the sting away.'

'To himself!' echoed Grace scornfully. 'I presume you mean to himself and you——'

'Oh! you may be as nasty as you like about that,' interrupted Lesley hotly, 'but I know I am right. It would only be a fresh tie between you—a new sentiment.'

Lady Arbuthnot flushed up to the eyes. 'Really, Lesley! you pass bounds! You speak as if I wanted to—to clutch at Mr. Raymond, when I should only be too glad if—— However, as you say, my apology is a triviality. Sir George shall——'

'Sir George!' echoed Lesley in her turn, shaking her head. 'No! he is not one of those who ought to know that you know, either. He may have to know, perhaps, but it should not be through you. Look! how he *will* give the credit to Mr. Kenyon; and if he knew it was Mr. Raymond, he would insist still more on giving it to him. You know he would, Lady Arbuthnot—there would be a fuss, and every one would talk, and he would hate it—almost worse than Mr. Raymond. Why not leave it alone—if we can—what harm does it do?'

'You have grown very wise, Lesley,' said the elder woman after a pause. 'Love, they say, has eyes——'

'Love!' Lesley flashed round on her like a whirlwind. 'Ah! I wish there was no such thing in the world. Then we women would have a chance of being sensible. Love! No, Lady Arbuthnot, love has nothing to do with it—nothing.'

They stood facing each other, those two, and then a smile—distinctly a pleased smile—came to the older face. 'But, my dear child, you don't mean to tell *me* that you are *not* in love with Mr. Raymond!'

The flush up to the eyes was Lesley's now; but she stood her ground bravely. 'It does not matter if I am or not; I am not going to talk of it. And I promised him——'

Grace broke in with a little peal of laughter, tender, amused, pathetic, yet acquiescent laughter. 'Has it got so far as that? Ah! Lesley dear! I'm so glad.'

The girl looked at her with a faint wonder, a great admiration, then shook her head.

'I believe you are made different from me,' she said soberly. 'I can only understand one thing about it all—how it was that *he* never forgot—well, never quite forgot.

For there is nothing to be glad of, I can assure you—nothing at all.'

She did not, in truth, look as if there was; but Grace, as she took Sir George his tea, as she always did, had her eyes full of that mysterious gladness which any sentiment, even sorrow, brings to some women's faces. It suited hers, and so her husband's had quite a lover-like diffidence in it as he watched her fingering the thin gold chain with pink topazes hanging from it, which he took from a drawer.

'It was in that casket the police found,' he explained, 'and I told them, if no owner turned up for it, to send it for you to see, and then if you liked it——'

She looked up, smiling. 'It is too young for me. Yes! it is true, George, I am getting old—ever so old! But I'll tell you what we will do! If we can buy it, we will give it to Lesley as a wedding-present when she marries Mr. Raymond.'

Sir George sat back in his chair—perhaps she had meant that he should.

'My dear girl!' he said feebly, 'this is the first I have heard of it. Mr. Raymond! And I thought——'

'Never mind what you thought,' she put in decidedly: 'it isn't quite settled yet; but it is going to be. Oh yes! it is going to be!'

'Well!' said Sir George—recovering himself for the usual formula—'he is a very lucky fellow! But it is—er—all the more likely to be so, because, curiously enough, I have been told to offer Mr. Raymond the trusteeship of the old Thakoor of Dhurmkote's affairs. In fact, the old man refused point-blank to have any one else, and as we want him to retrench and adopt an heir properly——'

'My dear George!' exclaimed Lady Arbuthnot, 'how perfectly delightful!—it—it will settle everything!'

'Yes; I—I suppose it will,' replied Sir George dubiously, and then his sober common sense came to the front—'not, my dear, that I exactly see what had to—to—er—be settled.'

'No! perhaps not,' said Grace thoughtfully, 'but it will, all the same.'

With which mysterious remark she went off to set springes for that Love with a big L, which *was* to settle all things.

She was an expert in the art, as women of her type always are, and yet the days passed without bringing her success.

For something, of which she knew nothing, stood between those two.

Put briefly, it was a *râm-rucki*. And so when they met—which was inevitably often, under Lady Arbuthnot's skilful hands—they talked of everything under the sun—of their adventure together, of the extraordinary way in which Fate had favoured them, of Chris Davenant and Jân-Ali-shân's mysterious disappearances, of the pearls, and the signet of royalty that was not to be found anywhere. They even talked of the Thakoor of Dhurmkote, and the almost endless interest and power of such a life as that now offered to Jack Raymond—they even quarrelled over his hesitancy in accepting it; but they never talked of what Lesley had asked him to forget—what she had stigmatised scornfully as the 'rest of it.'

Grace became almost tearful over the fact. It seemed to her at last as if, even here, hers was not to be the hand to wile Jack Raymond back either to duty or pleasure.

And it was not. That task was reserved for a simpler hand; a hand that had neither clutched nor refused, the hand of a woman to whom 'the rest of it' was neither to be despised nor overestimated, and who had neither scorned it nor sought for it.

It was Auntie Khôjee's when, one day, Jack Raymond and Lesley found themselves deftly manœuvred by Grace Arbuthnot into the *tête-à-tête* of a visit to the old lady; not in the least against their wills, for he was quite content with, and she vastly superior to, such palpable ruses; besides, she really wanted to see the originator of the *râm-rucki*, who was now decently established on the top of an offshoot of the city, which jutted out into that very pleasure-garden to which the old lady had come with her petition to the bracelet-brother.

So, one morning, Lesley drove down to the Garden. Jack Raymond met her, riding, at the gate, and together they strolled along that wide cross of water and marble and flowers, and climbed the dark stair which led to the little square of roof and the little slip of room that were only just large enough for Auntie Khôjee and the helplessness for which she cared; for Khôjee, helpless as she was, had always stood between some one still more helpless and the buffets of fate, and would have felt lost without the occupation.

And there was no reason why she should be without it, when Lateefa, paralysed from the waist beyond all hope of ever getting about again, lacked a caretaker.

And so he sat, busy as ever, with slips of bamboo and sheets of tissue-paper on the little square of roof, just as he had sat in the wide courtyard where the royal peacocks now spread their broken plaster tails over plague patients—those plague patients which the vast stability of the Oriental had by this time accepted as inevitable; which it had taken, as it were, into its immemorial custom.

Lateefa had been once more asking for paste, and Khôjee had brought him some—without lumps!—in a leaf cup; for she laid it aside to receive Jack Raymond with a '*Bismillah!*' of pleasure, and the strange Miss with a ceremonious *salaam*. Lateefa had the latter for both visitors, but there was a bold questioning in his black eyes for the *Huzoor*, who gave back the look with a valiant attempt at unconsciousness.

There was a curious peace up there on the roof, Lesley felt, with only one or two of Lateefa's kites between you and the sky, and the even flow of Lateefa's Persian quotations in your ears; for Auntie Khôjee—after disposing her guests on two rush stools—had hurried into the slip of a room for cardamoms, since they belong to congratulations as well as to consolations.

And, nowadays, what with her pension and Lateefa's earnings, there were always cardamoms, real cardamoms, on the roof, and many another comfort besides.

Lateefa, making polite conversation, admitted this openly, while Jack Raymond looked uneasily at Lesley, wondering—if her knowledge of the vernacular had not been mercifully limited—what she would have said to the pointed allusions to the benefit every man derived from associating himself with a truly virtuous woman, and the desirableness of settling down in time; not as he—Lateefa—had done, too late for hope of leaving aught behind him but the flimsy children of naught above him! A sorry legacy to the world; though in their day they had done strange things! But the *Huzoor* was wiser! He——

Here Aunt Khôjee—who with the most innocent of vanities had spent part of her absence in putting on a very stiff new pink net veil, which during the rest of the visit refused to stop on her head, and to the old lady's intense discomfiture left her

sparse grey hairs indecently exposed at crucial moments—reappeared with the cardamoms, to Jack Raymond's great relief; though he soon discovered that the real horror of the situation was only just beginning.

For, seated decorously apart, yet with her half-averted face alight with smiles and interest, she began on a series of questions which made his heart sink within him, since he knew Lesley of old.

And sure enough it was not long before the latter said, aggrievedly, 'You might translate what she is saying. After all, I did come to visit her, you know!'

He left the path of truth, then, desperately, with the result that Lesley commissioned him to make the proper reply to such Oriental periphrasis—something, *he was to be sure*, that would please the dear old thing.

Then he realised that he was hopelessly emmeshed, for, of course, Auntie Khôjee wanted a reply to her question; and it was not what she had desired, at all.

'She doesn't look a bit pleased,' remarked Lesley, *de haut en bas*. 'Dear me! I wish I could speak. I know I could do better than that! And I hate being dependent.'

'I wish you could,' said Jack Raymond grimly. 'I don't want to be a go-between!'

His evident ill-temper mollified her. 'Well! at any rate, you might try again, and say something else.'

So he did; and he and Aunt Khôjee had quite an animated passage, while Lateefa from his kites listened, and looked knowing.

'Well!' remarked Lesley at last, quite angrily. 'I don't see what was the use in my coming at all! You might at least give me a hint of what you are talking about! It is very rude.'

His temper went then altogether. 'If you want to know,' he said, still more grimly, 'she was asking when we are going to be married.'

Lesley gasped. 'Married!'—she echoed indignantly, yet conscious of a curious desire to smile and feel happy which must be squashed firmly—'well! if she does, Mr. Raymond, you can tell her—*never!*' Her dignity was tremendous.

'I have told her so three times,' replied Jack Raymond gravely, 'but she won't believe it; she says——'

'I don't care what she says,' retorted Lesley quickly. 'She must be *made* to believe it. Tell her—tell her about the *râm-rucki*, and all that. She will understand then.'

'She may,' assented Jack dubiously; 'but it is a little—ahem—mixed up—— isn't it?'

A suspicion that the situation was beginning to amuse him made her say—

'Not at all! Of course she will understand. She gave you a *râm-rucki*, and why—why shouldn't I?'

'No reason at all. I'm awfully glad you did.'

He looked it, and Lesley felt once more that absurd desire to smile and feel happy as she sat listening, watching the withered old face, waiting for the answer.

It was not much when it came. It was only a pursing up of the lips that had never known a lover's kiss, a gentle raillery in the kind tear-dimmed eyes, and a brisk flirt of the fingers that had worn themselves to the bone to bring happiness to others.

'*Trra!*' said Auntie Khôjee, with supreme unconcern for explanations. '*Trra!*'

'I'm afraid it is no go, Miss Drummond,' said Jack decorously. 'I believe it—it would save trouble if we—for the time only, of course——'

Lesley blushed a fine blush. 'I daresay you are right,' she assented, supremely superior; 'it doesn't really matter—for the time,' she added significantly.

And after that an almost reckless happiness was added to the peace of the roof.

Lateefa quoted Hâfiz by the yard. Auntie Khôjee got hold of Lesley's hand and held it fast with one of hers, while the other slid up and down the girl's arm with the little caressing pats and pinches with which she had tried to wile away Noormahal's weariness, and Jack Raymond sat and looked on with——

With what? Lesley did not quite realise what the expression was till they were alone together on their way back through the garden once more. Then she recollected it; for his face was all soft and kind, all lit up with a delicate raillery, a forgetfulness of the workaday world, just as it had been that evening—that evening, when another woman had been his companion—that evening when she had felt so lonely—when the cinnamon dove——

'*Do-you-love-too? do-you-love-too?*' came the question from the rose-bush once more; but the bird did not fly from its shelter now. There was no thorn in the path now to make those two pause and startle it. So the question followed them. '*Do-you-love-too? do-you-love-too?*' as they walked side by side, leaving the Sanctuary behind them, nearing the gilded summer-house before them.

'There's no hurry, is there?' said the man suddenly when they reached it. 'Let us sit down a bit and talk—about ourselves.'

The girl sat down, but shook her head. 'It was only for the time, Mr. Raymond,' she said, not pretending to misunderstand his meaning.

'Why should it only be for the time?'

'Why?' she echoed, looking out into the Pleasure-garden of Kings. 'For a great many reasons, I think.'

And then she began on them, one by one, dispassionately, rationally; and sometimes he agreed with her despondently as to his character and interests, and sometimes he gave in to her greater knowledge regarding her own.

And the dove cooed on its question, and the jewelled parrots—winged creatures as they were—flew from one screen of flowering trees to the other, unable to escape the thraldom of the high wall hidden by leaf and blossom—unable to escape from that prisonment of pleasure.

'And so you see, Mr. Raymond,' came the girl's voice, 'the odds are——'

'The odds!' he echoed quickly, almost mischievously. 'Ah! if it is a question of odds, it's my innings—I'll take twenty to one on Bonnie Lesley!' He held out his hand.

She essayed a frown, she essayed a smile, and then she said, 'Really, you are too foolish — — — Jack!'

. . . . .

And so in the years to come, the old Thakoor of Dhurmkote will no doubt rescind his reproof, and, having forgotten Jerry, will call another little laddie 'a son of heroes.' And he may be; but Jack Raymond himself will keep that name for a boy who, by that time, will be at Eton or Harrow. And that boy will think of the graves in the Hollow of

Heroes, and wonder if Jân-Ali-shân ever came back to claim his.

He has not yet, and so the two hundred and odd thousand people in the city of Nushapore, and the fifty thousand people in cantonments, still expect him to be there some day, *when he is wanted.*

And he will, no doubt; for it is only the Spirit of Slaves that dies; the Spirit of Kings lives for ever.

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